



The *different*
world *magic* is
too *behind*!

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2

OVERLAP

CHAPTER 11

THE HERO SETS OUT

—Before the doors of the Imperial Palace of the Aster Kingdom, Camelia. Here, surrounded by soldiers standing in formation, musicians, and higher-ranked knights, Reiji, Mizuki, and Titania rode a dazzling chariot. Outside the palace gates, the residents of the royal capital of Mehter had gathered to send them off.

As part of their first step toward the eventual goal of defeating the Maou, the King had organized this public parade for Reiji and the others.

Suimei, feeling slightly regretful, said, “Finally, this day has come.”

And indeed, as Suimei had said, the day of their journey had finally come. As the parade drew to a close, the Maou suppression force – Reiji and the others, accompanied by a vast number of knights – would thus finally begin their journey. A feeling of sadness at their parting was inevitable.

Reiji, on the other hand, wore a look of clear excitement on his face. Whether this was because he looked forward to the road ahead, or had simply chosen to wear such an expression to hide the anxiety he felt was unclear. Just as Suimei had settled his feelings and prepared to speak, Reiji, optimism still shining bright, spoke up first.

“Well, we’re taking off.”

“You sure say that lightly.”

Suimei’s sincere sorrow was replaced with irritation. Responding, Reiji’s expression sobered greatly.

“It’s not like that. I’ve put a lot of thought into this, you know? My answer

at that time was definitely the right one.”

“No, it was definitely wrong. No matter how I look at it, I can only say that it’s wrong.”

Staring off into the distance, the feelings gripping his heart wouldn’t let go. Titania, same as always, her hands clutched before her chest, stepped in.

“Suimei-sama...”

She was the princess of the Aster Kingdom. Her feelings towards Suimei’s words were, of course, quite complicated. On the one hand, her certainty of the necessity of the Maou suppression force had never wavered, though she, like her father, felt a terrible sense of guilt that would not be extinguished.

As if to dispel the worry in her eyes, Reiji patted her lightly on the shoulder and, approaching Suimei, spoke, his words full of resolve.

“No, that’s not how it is, Suimei. Setting aside whether or not I go, the Maou’s forces will never stop their attacks on human lands. Seeing as we have no way to go home, then it’s not like there’s anywhere for us to run either. In other words, the day will inevitably come when we will have to fight the Maou. Although nothing’s for certain, but when it comes to confronting the enemy, the sooner, the better. That is, of course, providing that this is all with the goal of taking down the Maou.”

Speaking at length, Reiji bared his feelings on the matter. Sure enough, he had put a great deal of thought into something as ridiculous as wanting to participate in the war. As he’d considered things, the realization that war with the Maou would be inevitable at some

point. He'd come to the understanding that their actions now were their best chance of a counteroffensive.

Being that as it may, Suimei was unrelenting, and continued to press the point.

"Reiji, do you really think that just by not backing down, there will eventually be a day when you can overthrow the Maou?"

"I don't have the ability to make that sort of judgment. To be honest, I think that if worst comes to worst, there's about an 80% chance that we'll die."

These were not words blinded by optimism, but rather words grounded in reality.

Nonetheless—

"Seriously, you're always like this, never losing hope until all is lost."

"Is that not okay?"

"I can't say I hate that part of you, but just this once, I really don't think you're making the right choice. The Maou's army is nothing like those thugs and hooligans from back home, you know?"

Suimei was referring to their life from before. Reiji, and his strong sense of justice that came from God knows where, would frequently find himself engaged in brawls with thugs.

Thankfully, due to his skills and natural disposition, he'd never really had a problem before. The difficulty was that the Maou and the ruffians from back home were opponents of a completely different level. The likelihood that things would be resolved as smoothly as they always had before was

incredibly low.

That notwithstanding, Reiji, his voice filled with confidence, spoke again.

"Even so, I still think this is the better way."

"...I'm seriously talking to myself here, aren't I?"

"Hahahaha."

Looking at the maddened expression on his friend's face, Reiji laughed happily. An open conversation between two friends who knew each other so well was definitely something to be enjoyed, a happy thing.

His friend having honestly bared his full thoughts on the matter, Suimei responded in kind.

"...I understand. It's not that you're rushing to your death, but that you're fighting to protect your life here. Forgive me, I said too much. That said, please don't force yourself."

A moment's thought made it all clear. Although, at first glance, his actions might have appeared inspired more by brawn than by brains, but in retrospect, that was not the case at all. No, this was born of a desire to protect their lives here, as well as more than a hint of the stubbornness that could always be found in his actions. That said, Suimei couldn't help but acknowledge the truth in his words.

At his friend's serious reply, Reiji, a somewhat serious look on his face, replied.

"Don't worry about it. Just after this, we'll head straight for the Maou—"

"Are you kidding me..."

"Hahahaha. Yes, yes, I am. No, first things first. I need to become

stronger.”

Seeing his friend left speechless by his abrupt insertion of a joke amid their serious back-and-forth, Reiji broke into laughter. Seriously, making that kind of joke during a serious discussion? Just what was this guy thinking?

No, he understood. Reiji’s heart was likely filled with unease. Filled with anxiety, he’d tried to lighten the mood, and so he’d made a harmless joke to try and dispel the negative emotions gripping him.

Indeed, he couldn’t blame him for his hastiness. He couldn’t be mad about it. It was, after all, born of the need to relieve the pressure being exerted by all parties on the one who bore the title of Hero.

Thus, Suimei leaned in, and whispering into Reiji’s ear with a sober tone, he said, “...The moment you feel that things are looking bad, I want you to run, and take Mizuki with you. Find somewhere to go, and hide. Even if you are the Hero, this is real life, not fiction. There’s no guarantee that you’ll actually be able to beat the Maou.”

“...I understand, but I fully intend to fight to my very limits.”

“You really are a stubborn bastard, aren’t you?”

At Reiji’s utter unwillingness to compromise, Suimei was again left speechless. Reiji spoke once more, but this time, to ask a question.

“So what are your plans after this, Suimei?”

“Me? Well, pretty much this. I’m going to head out.”

“Wha...?”

This was his first time hearing this. Definitely the first time. Not once had

Suimei ever explained his plans to Reiji and the others.

Mizuki, speaking for the three others, questioned him next, her voice tinged with both surprise and concern.

"Suimei-kun, what do you plan to do by leaving the palace?"

"Eh, nothing special. I just want to experience life outside for a bit," he replied indifferently, hiding his true intentions.

At these words, Reiji's face wrinkled in worry.

"Life outside?"

"Look for work. You know, things like that."

"Suimei-sama, if you stay in the palace, then my father will provide for your needs. There's no need to force yourself to live outside," Titania interrupted.

"Oh, I'm sure, but still, I'm leaving."

"May I ask why? Although the capital is safe enough, but as a person from another world, you lack both knowledge of this world or the protection bestowed upon the hero. Outside of the palace, there's no guarantee of your safety. I don't see the benefits of leaving?"

It was just as she said. Given that they knew nothing of his true abilities or his actual goal, her words were quite logical.

"No... Well, it's probably a bit rude of me to say this, but... Living in the palace makes me feel pretty awful."

"Ah..."

Titania showed a sorrowful look. She seemed to understand; she'd probably heard all the bad things that had been said about him, and thus

sank into silence.

Immediately following, Reiji spoke, not bothering to hide his displeasure.

"Why don't I try and talk to them for you?"

And what was that supposed to mean? He couldn't possibly plan on talking with the palace people one by one, hoping to change their opinions about Suimei, could he? That was completely insane.

"It's okay, I'm fine like this. At this point, what purpose would that serve? It'd only make things worse."

"...Even if you say that..."

"It's fine. Anyway, I need to think over my plans for the rest of the day."

At this point, Mizuki suddenly cut in.

"What do you mean 'plans for the rest of the day'? What about money?"

"I plan to sell the stuff I brought with me that are useless here, like textbooks and the like."

"Can you even sell those things? Everything's in Japanese."

He'd long since prepared an answer to her surprised question. He, of course, was confident in his ability to sell his things.

He turned to Titania, looking to confirm something.

"I should be able to sell them, right?"

"You should be able to, yes. I imagine the prices would be rather high due either to merchants mistaking them for grimoires or nobles aiming to help..."

Titania had likely seen their textbooks before, and knew what they were.

As a person of this world, her opinion was likely to be on point.

It was a fact that their books were written entirely in Japanese. However, it was precisely because they were in an unreadable language that they had acquired something of a mysterious nature to the people of this world. Furthermore, because their covers were rather fancifully done, it was quite likely that people would easily mistake their value.

"I plan to raise prices quite a bit; I want to sell them for quite a sum. That should take care of my living expenses."

"...Honestly, Suimei-kun. Isn't that what we call a scam?"

"It's not like I'm lying or anything. Who cares anyway?"

His words notwithstanding, Suimei himself felt that he was being rather underhanded here. On the other hand, his actions were relatively harmless. Those who purchased his books for resale would likely make a good profit, and those who bought the books would be excited over their good fortune. Finally, even if he'd said he'd try to inflate prices, it wasn't like he intended to charge some extravagant sum for them either.

"Are you really going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I should be just fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. At the very least, I already know what I'm going to do for the rest of the day anyway."

Mizuki looked torn. It didn't look like she'd quite accepted things. If he'd accepted training in magic and combat as they'd had, or, at the very least, had received some instruction regarding the things of this world, she

likely wouldn't have felt this way. Unfortunately, he'd only absorbed some very basic knowledge offhand. Her concern was natural.

That being the case, he could only try and hand wave his way through an explanation.

Thinking for a moment, he decided to question the worried Mizuki in turn.

"On that note, rather than worrying about me, Mizuki, shouldn't you be worrying about yourself?"

"I-I'm okay! I've even already learned how to use magic, after all."

Indeed, she and Reiji had both been taught some magic. From Titania's perspective, Mizuki had attained a level that put her on equal footing with Reiji; there was no reason for her to be worried. Suimei, however, had been not been speaking about that.

"That's what I mean. Magic. You've already learned magic now, but I want to remind you not to repeat what happened before. Right, Reiji?"

Looking to the friend who understood what he meant for confirmation, Reiji could only laugh.

"A... ahahahahaha!"

"S-S-S-Suimei-kun! You promised to never talk about that again!"

Mizuki, on the other hand, was flustered and blushed a deep red. As far as Mizuki was concerned, this was a memory better left unremembered. What he'd been referring to had been something that had happened in the past, when they'd first met, where she'd been, to some degree, someone they couldn't leave alone.

Titania, who was clueless about their shared history, tilted her head in

puzzlement.

" 'What happened before?' "

"Yep, yep."

"Suimei-kun! That's not something you're allowed to ever talk about! Absolutely not! I'm not joking!"

Mizuki's frantic expression wasn't something she'd shown in their entire time here. Lending a hand to his panicked friend, Reiji turned to the confused Titania and offered an answer to her question.

"Mizuki's been through some stuff, Tia."

"I'm interested."

"Don't be! This is a huge secret that will forever stay between the three of us! It's a secret garden! A dangerous secret that can never be revealed to anyone ever!"

"If you're going to go that far, that only makes me even more interested..."

Titania revealed a hurt look at having been excluded. Suimei decided it was time to turn the topic away from Mizuki, he turned to their female companion who'd brought this all up in the first place.

"You know, Princess, you're also taking part in the Maou suppression force. Is that okay?"

"Ara, don't take me too lightly, Suimei-sama. I, too, have studied magic, and will definitely be of great help to Reiji-sama," Titania replied, sticking her chest out proudly.

He wasn't sure at what level her magic was, but that wasn't really what

he'd been asking anyway.

"Princess, you're definitely versed in magic to be sure, but what I meant was if it was okay for a person of your standing?"

"There's no need to worry about that. There's still my father and his ministers. Even if I leave Aster, it poses no problem whatsoever."

"No, that's not what I meant either— "

As someone who possessed the delicate beauty of a butterfly or a flower, she was the princess beloved by all. Why would someone like that need to take part in such a dangerous venture? Moreover, she'd even received the king's support in doing so.

There wasn't a father alive who didn't love their child. Even if his daughter herself had been willing, how could he allow her to expose herself to such dangerous circumstances? Even if it was probably a bit crude to say as much, but such a princess had much more to offer her kingdom than just this.

Knowing all that, and allowing her to come along... what had been the reasoning behind such a thing?

"Suimei-sama, this is the duty I bear."

Was it really alright for her to just thrust herself into the heart of danger? As he'd prepared to ask her as much, she'd cut him off with those words, delivered in a solemn tone.

"Duty... is it?"

"...Yes. No matter how powerful Reiji-sama might be, we cannot push all of the responsibility onto his shoulders. On the contrary, there must be at

least one from the Aster Kingdom who bears an equal burden. The one chosen for this was none other than myself. I've resolved myself."

"..."

Perhaps that was indeed the case. No, Titania's resolve wasn't at such a weak level that it could be called into doubt. Her powerful words had been heartfelt and unimpeachable. Titania had taken upon herself the mantle of responsibility and it was for that reason that she was here now. Seeing her determination, he was struck by a feeling of sorrow. He could only imagine the bitterness the people of the Aster Kingdom must have felt. Thus, rather than strengthening her argument, her words had instead somehow weakened it.

"Suimei-sama?"

"...Seeing as that's the case, I must apologize my for rude words earlier. I leave Reiji and Mizuki in your care."

"Please, leave them to me. I will ensure that everyone returns home safely and soundly."

As she spoke, she nodded firmly. Although just for a moment, because the promise had come from the princess before him, just for a moment, he felt that it was certain to happen.

Suddenly, this princess with an iron will spoke to Suimei.

"I still have something I wish to say, Suimei-sama."

"Yes?"

"I already count Reiji-sama and Mizuki-sama among my dear friends. For that reason, I would ask that you, who are their friend, not be so formal

with me. Would that be alright?”

The princess had voiced this wish of her own accord. This was not something that someone of her position should ever have requested of someone of his.

“Is that really okay?”

“Please.”

Responding to his question, she had repeated her plea once more. Suimei calmed himself and gave his consent.

“...I understand. Let’s do that then. Princess—”

“—It’s ‘Titania’, Suimei,” Titania countered, a faint smile on her face.

Such a smile could only be described as “divine.” Were someone unfamiliar with the opposite sex faced with such a smile, they’d be done for. In some indescribable way, her smile reminded him of Reiji.

He couldn’t allow himself to be charmed, though. Instead, he returned her smile.

“Right. It’s a pleasure, Titania.”

“With this, the four of us are all friends.”

From this day forward, they’d be inseparable companions. As Reiji and Mizuki watched on, in their eyes, Titania’s joy seemed that of someone who had just made their first friend.

Abruptly, Suimei called out to Reiji.

“Hey.”

“Hmm?”

“Uh, never mind.”

Seeing Reiji’s expression, without a hint of negativity, Suimei shut his mouth.

Originally, he’d planned on asking, “If there was a way to go back home, would you want to?” Something like, “If you’re willing to wait, then I’ll definitely make it happen.”

But he’d stopped himself. Even if he’d said that, Reiji would not turn back from the path he’d chosen. All he’d achieve would be to further confuse the situation. Suimei would not allow himself to be an obstacle along his friend’s path without reason. That’s why it was better off left unsaid. He’d keep this all to himself until things progressed further.

“Good luck out there.”

“Yeah, you too. Thanks, Suimei.”

“Ah.”

Reiji smiled as Suimei nodded his head. Trials lay ahead; he could only face them head-on with a light smile, and worry on his face, and courage in his heart.

...Finally the preparations for their journey finished. Titania turned to Reiji.

“It’s time for us to go, Reiji-sama.”

“Got it. Mizuki, stay close, alright?”

“...”

At Reiji’s extended hand, Mizuki nodded in embarrassment. Reiji’s intentions were clearly purely aimed at making sure someone close to

him did not encounter unnecessary danger, but Mizuki and Titania saw more in it than that. As Mizuki took Reiji's arm with both embarrassment and joy, Titania watched with an envious gaze.

"R-Reiji-sama! Me too!"

"Eh? Tia?!"

Reiji yelped in surprise as Titania grabbed his other arm.

A look of understanding appeared on his face as he took Titania's arm in his – though he clearly had not the least understanding of what was going on.

"Sure. Don't leave my side, Titania."

"—! Never!"

At Reiji's words, Titania smiled brightly and answered happily.

...A beautiful girl clinging to each arm, the hero majestically strode onto the chariot.

Were anyone to glance around, they'd notice the envious and hate-filled stares of all the surrounding men, knights and soldiers alike. Before long, Suimei joined them.

"...You know what? Forget it. You're better off staying stuck here forever."

Jealousy. Pure, unadulterated jealousy. It was stupid, but he couldn't help but feel that way. The feeling wracking him likely had the surrounding soldiers in its grip as well.

Truthfully, though, his words were unnecessary. He knew that Reiji had no intentions of spending the rest of his life in this world living a rose-colored life. As Suimei mused to himself, a question from Reiji

interrupted his thoughts.

"Did you say something, Suimei?"

"N-no, definitely not."

"...? If you say so," Reiji replied, puzzled.

As far as he was concerned, figuring out the feelings of the others in this situation – either the women or the men – wasn't something he'd ever be able to do.

With that, the chariot took the three, one with a look of incomprehension, with two at his side with joyous expressions, away from Suimei.

...At long last, the sound of the city gates opening filled the air. Music played, and applause and cheers heralded the departure of Reiji and the others.

As the gates closed, Suimei stood alone, as if he'd been left behind. Well, to be honest, that was precisely what had happened, but it was something he'd chosen for himself. The sorrow and loneliness filling him were the consequence of that choice.

"They left, huh..." he muttered as he stared blankly.

Wanting to return home, needing to go home, turning his back on danger... had that choice been wrong? As he watched his friends vanish, heading straight into danger, that thought crossed his mind.

—After this, he'd be walking down his own path, different from the one they had taken. Weakness could not be allowed. Such thoughts were out of line for one belonging to the Magician's Society.

That said, he still couldn't see a decision to walk down the path leading to the Maou as a good one.

The proposition had clearly yet to be completed; it'd be all in vain if he never went home. There were assignments he had to fulfill, people he had to save. Given the responsibilities he already had to bear, turning his back on the needs of this world wasn't too much to ask. However, that reasoning seemed but hollow excuses in the face of those who had just departed.

"..."

As he deliberated, he gazed upward.

Images of the people important to him seemed to appear in the azure sky.

The one who had raised him and taught him magic, his father who had stumbled along the path of magic.

The head of the Magician's Society, always shoving impossible problems his way.

Caught in Ludwig's curse, an azure shadow of a young girl.

The stubborn vanguard of the Knights of the Rose Cross.

The footsteps he'd left behind at the nearby dojo with his childhood friend.

His choice had been purely a selfish one; this he understood very well. And yet, faced with the figures that appeared in his mind he knew that this was already the only choice left to him.

CHAPTER 12

APPEARANCES ARE IMPORTANT

A few days had passed since Reiji and the others had left. Traveling alone, and having already confirmed his plans for the day, Suimei left Camelia Palace.

When the others had left the palace, their departure had been met with great fanfare and been accompanied by a parade; Suimei's only companion, however, was silence. That was to be expected, though. Before he'd left, he'd said his farewells to Aster's King, King Almadiyauss, and Felmenia, before silently making his way to the capital of Mehter.

"I never thought he'd provide me with some funds..." he mumbled hesitantly, hefting the pouch in his hands. The sound of metallic clinking could be heard as the bag shook. As Suimei had prepared to leave the castle, Chancellor Gress had handed him this pouch, within which some 20-odd coins were stored.

This had happened just before he'd set out. The chancellor had informed him in no uncertain terms that he should thank the king for his generosity, open disdain in his eyes. After a long-winded and mind-numbing speech, this small bag had been forced into his hands like a divorce settlement and he'd been speedily driven from the palace.

Judging from the chancellor's words, Suimei determined that this had been the King's idea, and that he had ordered the chancellor here in secret.

At this unexpected turn of events, Suimei could only scratch his head weakly.

I was pretty explicit about not needing anything. Isn't this just the King putting me in his debt...

Despite his having protested quite adamantly against any assistance during their discussion in the audience room, he'd nonetheless had some idea that they'd try to assist him somehow. As far as the King was concerned, this wasn't likely part of a scheme or anything, but rather purely out of his good will. Be that as it may, when it came to the "debt" he'd incurred with this favor, Suimei would have preferred to do without. It had not made him happy.

When it came to debts of favors, having someone in your debt gave you the right to call in a favor when you needed help. This had forcefully created a tie between him and the Aster Kingdom. Although he'd never say it out loud, that it had been a fairly underhanded thing to do was indisputable.

The goal had been to take advantage of his goodwill and conscience, to ensure that future dealings with him would be smoother. As the saying went, favors aren't done for others, they're done for yourself.

"Ha... What a nasty trick. Then again, I guess if he couldn't do this much, he wouldn't be fit to be the king of a nation..."

Suimei had considered returning the gift on the spot, but the King had foreseen this, knowing that if he did not show himself, but rather entrusted the task to one of his officials, then Suimei would find it hard to do so. Indeed, if he'd rejected the King's gift to the face of that chancellor with the parted hair, then there would definitely be grave consequences once he'd left the safety of the palace. His desire was to remain as low-key as possible, and depart from the palace in peace. For

that reason, he'd had no choice but to quietly accept the gift.

Of course, if the purse had come with strings attached, he'd have had a reason to decline. As it categorically had not, however, finding a reason to say no had been hard, all the more so because it had been money, something he would need a great deal of in the days ahead.

From transportation to lodging fees, from magical components to food, money was necessary for a countless number of things. The more money he had, the better. In his current situation, that was indisputably a major weakness of his. As he weighed the pros and cons, he had, in the end, taken the money.

In any event, an owed favor was still far from an actual obligation. The other party would, in the end, have to rely on his willingness to repay the favor out of good conscience. No matter what were to happen or what were to be asked, if he really didn't want to do it, then that would be the end of it.

The only problem was... he wasn't sure whether he was capable of something so cold and calculating.

...Suimei's gaze fell upon the letter that had come with the pouch. On the top-quality paper was written the King's hopes that, no matter what, he would accept this sign of goodwill, words that surprised him. Moved by the words on the paper, Suimei sighed.

After this, or rather, because of this, he'd have to show his gratitude for the King. Turning to face the palace, now off in the distance, he bowed his head once more in respect.

"You old fox."

Although, as expected, that wasn't nearly enough to dispel his poor mood entirely.



"...Alright, I should look pretty normal with this now."

After leaving the palace, Suimei's first stop had been a clothing store. Confirming that he'd successfully passed for a member of the populace, he finally relaxed.

His thoughts had been straightforward.

In this Medieval-era European-like city, his school uniform had stood out like a sore thumb. This was not something that had occurred to him only after setting foot in the city, but rather a necessity he'd foreseen ahead of time. Although for Reiji and Mizuki, modern clothing was almost something like the symbol of their status as heroes, for Suimei, who desired to live from today on as a normal member of society, his school uniform was far too conspicuous. While the need for him to don his modern clothing might later arise, for the purposes of daily life, it was better not to do so.

And so the acquisition of normal clothing had become a top priority, which had led Suimei directly to a clothing store. Although he'd successfully managed to sell the textbooks he'd brought from his own world, he'd spent the gold coins he'd received from the king, changing them to silver.

He hadn't bothered concerning himself with price, instead prioritizing dressing up in the same manner as others of his age, resulting in his current appearance. As might be expected, the clothing he'd purchased

did not fit him nearly as well as modern clothing, not to mention the material was considerably stiffer. It was probably impossible to find anything that would fit him that well here.

That aside, thanks to his new change of clothes, he didn't have to worry about standing out too much anymore.

"Right then. Next up is the adventurer's guild..."

Verifying the feel of his sleeves, he set off for the adventurer's guild.

The reason the adventurer's guild fell next in priority after the clothing store was because he'd decided that the need for proper identification was imperative. After registering with the guild, he'd be able to obtain an adventurer's status, something that he needed given his current circumstances.

Although he thought nothing of leaving the palace and surviving by his lonesome, this would allow him to switch his status from that of a guest in the palace to that of a vagabond.

He was, after all, from another world altogether. Although he could pretend to be a traveler from abroad, he would nonetheless be suspicious to those around him as a person of unclear identity. That could be very inconvenient for him. Purchase of food, clothing, and lodging were the best examples. When it came to the role identification played in daily life, this fantasy world was no different from the more modern one from which he'd come. If he were caught without a valid form of identification – the only tangible way to verify someone's identity at a glance – it was possible that situations might arise that would prove far more dangerous than they would in his world.

Of course Suimei, as a magician, was in possession of magic that could allow him to lie his way through many a problem should the occasion require, but piling up lies one on top of another could land him in a predicament of his own creation should something unfortunate and unforeseen occur.

Alternatively, it was possible to obtain government ID from the nearby municipal office for a small fee, but as Suimei had no intentions of staying in the area, he had rejected such an option out of hand.

Even though he'd already decided to leave Aster, and thus acquiring ID wasn't an immediate need, but seeing as it was something he'd need no matter where he went, he'd decided that getting one as soon as possible was still the wiser decision.

Additionally, were he to join the adventurer's guild here in Aster, given the relationship between Aster and Nelferia, his guild membership would automatically be valid in Nelferia as well.

Finally, among the information he'd gleaned from the books in the palace library, he'd learned that the adventurer's guild was a rather unique existence among guilds – they accepted anyone and everyone.

When it came to other guilds, particularly crafting guilds – the merchant's guild, for example, which existed to preserve commodity prices and establish trade routes – created by those who belonged to a specific craft, commissions dealt with the provision of needed materials. Most of these thus had entrance requirements, necessitating either prior experience in the field or a guarantor.

The adventurer's guild, however, operated by different rules. Stated rather

bluntly, even someone without so much as a penny to their name could easily join the guild; as long as you could handle the work, nothing else mattered.

That notwithstanding, the adventurer's guild was not to be taken lightly either. What mattered most to the guild was skill and reliability. As guild commissions consisted of dangerous tasks such as monster hunting or frontier exploration, trust had to be earned before one would be entrusted with commissions. As might be expected of such a place, normal people never visited the guild unless they had requests of such a nature to make. For this reason, those without combat ability would not be accepted into the guild ranks.

On that note, why would Suimei, a magician, not aim to join the mage's guild instead? Well, understanding that requires an understanding of what makes the mage's guild unique. In this world, magic and swordsmanship are together the twin pillars of martial force. Accordingly, magic is a treasured weapon when nation wars with nation, and subsequently, the mage's guild is an integral part of each nation's military.

More specifically, members of the mage's guild were only allowed to wield their powers on behalf of their host nation.

When it came to Suimei, both his magic and research were something that he would only ever wield on behalf of the Magician's Society which shared his ideals. He would never give a moment's consideration to doing so on behalf of another organization, and so the mage's guild had been eliminated outright as an option.

Moreover, in order to avoid leaks of intel, when members of the mages guild crossed international borders, they did so under heavy restrictions

and per specific procedures which would prove an unneeded hindrance to Suimei's goals.

Simply put, the mage's guild was different from other guilds in that it was under the direct management of the nation itself. Obtaining ID from the mage's guild simply wasn't a preferable choice in light of that fact.

From what he'd gathered of what he'd heard from Felmenia and Reiji, who'd been under her tutelage, this world had no notion of magic systems. Magic was likely something they employed rather recklessly. Of course, there was always the possibility this was simply due to his unfamiliarity with their world – something which concerned him greatly. Unfortunately, failing a propitious encounter, he would likely never have the opportunity to find out the truth.

Collecting his thoughts as he walked, he soon arrived at the adventurer's guild.

The building was, like those around it, a two-story, wooden structure.

Erected before the building itself was a sign with a name, "Twilight Pavilion" in huge letters; the sign giving one the feeling that they were standing before a restaurant or a bar of some sort. Posted before the door stood two guards in plate mail.

Structurally, the building didn't really look that different from the others around it. If a difference had to be highlighted, it would only be that the space it occupied was vast indeed.

Cities in this world – Mehter not being alone in this – had massive, 20-meter tall walls encircling them to prevent attack from both invaders and monsters. Thus, the amount of space allotted a city was fixed and

consequently buildings were small and thin, and typically two or three stories tall.

With this in mind, the space occupied by the adventurer's guild was definitely an exception. Not only did it stand in a conspicuous location, but it took up far more room than its surrounding buildings. If this was allotted by the government, then the importance of this building – and that which it housed – was self-evident.

If one were to look further, one other drastic difference would soon become apparent: scattered all around were dangerous-looking individuals. There were those who looked like characters from a game or a movie, strong warrior-types wearing incredible armor. There were also slim men and women who, like Felmenia, were attired in mage robes. Some of the men carried enormous claymores on their backs, while others hefted vicious maces that looked like they could smash human heads like watermelons.

Were such individuals to be found in modern day society, they'd have been arrested in moments for violating the Firearms and Swords Control Law, but there were likely no such regulations here. In this world, weapons could be said to be a vital tool of everyday life, whether that be for self-defense or for hunting. Regardless of whatever weapon type a person might choose to carry on their person, a law restricting its use was unlikely to exist.

That, however, meant the atmosphere created was incredibly nerve-wracking. Simply a step or two in the direction of the guild made it feel like the air was charged with energy.

For Suimei, a member of modern society, the feeling was decidedly fresh.

Suimei walked toward the door to the adventurer's guild, Twilight Pavilion, taking in the excitement around him as he did so, arriving at the front door moments later. At first, stopping before the large doorway, he paused, wondering if he was in the right place; the guards, after all, had not said a word. Seemingly understanding his confusion, however, they gave him a brief nod and a light wave, and he entered.

Inside, it was laid out much like described in fantasy works he'd read before. Looking around, it was clear that it had, at one point, served as a tavern. Taverns from the middle ages were unlike the bars of modern society. Instead, they served simultaneously as both general stores and a meetingplace; mixing these two together resulted in the adventurer's guild, which gave off an impression roughly equivalent to an old tavern.

There's no way it's really just like this, right? Suimei thought to himself. As he looked around the inside of Twilight Pavilion, and realized that the image in his mind indeed quite closely approximated reality, he sighed.

At the front of the large hall was a reception window where staff received clients. Before the window, a number of benches had been laid side-by-side. A small shelf housed what appeared to be newspapers and magazines. Next to it stood a request board which advertised available commissions.

The majority of the space within was consumed by what appeared to be a bar. Numerous tables and stools littered the area, and oaken kegs were piled like small mountains. Restless, red-faced individuals poured wine and ale down their gullets, completely uncaring that it was still bright out.

This scene would have been quite a shock to anyone from modern

society.

As Suimei took in the scene before him and walked further in, a sound escaped his mouth, though whether it was a sigh or a gasp of surprise he wasn't sure.

On the benches, a number of people were seated, awaiting their turn. Suimei followed their example, finding a seat at the tail end of the line.

As he took his seat, he noticed a woman by his side, and a rather stunning one at that.

Unconsciously, he sighed at her beautiful appearance.

She had brilliant crimson hair that flowed to the waist, a dignified face with two piercing vermilion eyes, and a calm demeanor that spoke of a noble upbringing. Her armor of predominantly white, dotted with flaming red, hid a soft and slender figure. At her waist, she wore a decidedly unlady-like longsword. Her posture was refined and yet sturdy as a rock. In all, she radiated calm poise. If he were to describe her, she was like a still blade.

Even with his meager ability in swordsmanship, he could tell that she showed no openings. Simply put, this was someone of ability. From her appearance, he judged that she was similar in age to himself, but the impression he got from her felt anything but.

Were he the more flighty type, then he'd already have hit on the girl by his side, but he kept his actions to a light sigh. Because of his line of work, someone as full of secrets as Suimei had never been in a relationship before. Conflicting thoughts crossed his mind. This has nothing to do with me, he thought, even as he remembered all the girls

he was acquainted with, who all seemed to be troublesome individuals, but that wasn't important right now.

As Suimei waited his turn in line, whiling away his time thinking about trivial matters, all of a sudden the girl spoke to him.

"—Excuse me, but can I ask if you're a frequent visitor of the Twilight Pavilion?"

A surprisingly gentle voice.

Her tone had been neither hesitant nor rude, but was instead remarkably polite, which perfectly fit her image.

Taken aback by the fact that she would speak to him, Suimei almost reflexively replied in his normal manner. Struck by the feeling that that would be inappropriate, however, he answered her with the same polite manner with which she had spoken to him.

"Oh, no, not at all. To be honest, this is my first time here."

"What a coincidence, this is also my first time coming. I'd been wondering if this was the right line for guild applicants."

"I believe it is. If you look at those other windows, they seem to be for people accepting commissions."

As he spoke, he pointed in the direction of the alcohol-serving area. More reception windows like the one before them could be seen there with a collection of guild staff.

"Are you an adventurer as well?"

"Yes. I'm a woman who can't do anything else but fight. This seemed like the best place to come to earn a daily living."

The girl lightly tapped her sword as she mocked herself in a lively voice. As expected, she was someone who depended on combat to make a living. Judging by her appearance, she was either a warrior or a knight, so this was natural.

The girl suddenly offered her name.

"My name is Lefille Grakis. If it's not inconvenient, would you mind telling me your name as well?"

"Huh?"

What did she say? Did she just ask something? The situation had suddenly become an exchange of introductions, and Suimei unconsciously voiced his shock.

Her polite manner notwithstanding, this turn of events was really too sudden. They were just neighbors standing in line, why were they suddenly introducing themselves?

Lefille looked apologetic.

"Sorry. Suddenly asking for your name must have come as quite a surprise, but there's a reason for it."

"...And what would that be?"

"There's no need to be so guarded. When I visited the Church of Salvation earlier this morning, I received an oracle from the Goddess Arshuna: to exchange names with the people around me," she answered, half-sighing.

It looked like it wasn't just the person being questioned who was confused; the one asking the question was similarly bothered.

The Church of Salvation was the largest church in this world, one which

worshipped the Goddess Arshuna. Back in the audience room, when they'd heard about the Maou, apparently intel on his existence and movements had similarly come as oracles from the Goddess Arshuna. A young girl like this had been given an oracle as well?

"Why would she ask you to do that?"

"I don't really know myself. The priest in Mehter told me that the oracle from Arshuna meant that someone near me today would eventually become someone important to me."

"And that's why you asked for my name?"

"Yes."

"Oracles, huh. They sure are fishy... Oh, no offense."

The vague nature of the oracle had irritated Suimei to the point that he'd spoken without thinking, although he hastily corrected himself. As mentioned earlier, the Goddess Arshuna had countless believers. In this world, blasphemy was a dangerous thing, and was likely to draw the ire of surrounding people.

To have said something like that in front of someone who was a churchgoer... Suimei was regretting his disrespectful choice of words when Lefille smiled warmly.

"Haha, I know, right? That said, it's better to be careful. I personally don't mind, but if you were heard by someone particularly pious, you'd be in for a loooong sermon."

"I'll watch myself. I was a bit hasty."

"That'd be best. However, it's not like I have any right to talk, having

raised objections myself after receiving this kind of oracle.”

“Oh...?”

Suimei blinked in surprise. Perhaps that “loooong sermon” she had mentioned had been experienced firsthand.

Lefille laughed again, mocking herself.

“Honestly. Having something like this happen after praying for so long... I’m running way behind schedule because of that.”

“You have my sympathy.”

“No need, I did it to myself more or less. The fruits of my own foolishness, so to speak.”

“Let that be a lesson to me,” she added as Suimei posed a question of his own.

“So that’s been going on all day?”

Understanding the question implicit in his words – “You’ve been asking people like this all day?” – Lefille nodded strongly.

“Yeah. You’re already the tenth person today.”

“Wow. That’s awful.”

“Tell me about it. Once I mention the oracle, the predominant reaction has been to treat me like some kind of weirdo... but there’ve been a few who thought I was flirting with them.”

“Ahh...”

Suimei expressed his understanding of the situation as she sighed gloomily.

Although he wasn't quite sure just what kind of weirdo they imagined her to be, but the other kind he more or less understood. If someone as beautiful as her were to ask for someone's name, then all men – not just those with ulterior motives – would likely think she was flirting with them.

That heavy sigh was an indicator of just how many times this must have happened already.

"So, how about it? If it's not a problem, would you mind telling me your name?" Lefille asked once more, adjusting her posture.

What should I do about this...? To be honest, it wasn't really a big deal. As described by the oracle and her, perhaps this once-in-a-life-time chance meeting was really something more.

Just revealing his name would be harmless, so he answered.

"I'm Suimei Yakagi."

"Yakagi-kun, is it? Sorry for bothering you over something like this."

Seeing her apologetic look, Suimei shook his head.

"It's not a problem at all. On that note, can I ask? Are oracles from the Church of Salvation a common thing?"

"I don't think so. I'm a pretty frequent churchgoer, but this is my first time experiencing anything like this. It might be common for people more pious than myself though."

"I see..."

He replied in a tone of mixed interest and disinterest. So the Church of Salvation has oracles about individual lives, and not just governmental

affairs, huh? Is this all part of some greater plan or just a hobby of the person giving the oracles?

Although the intent was unclear – assuming, of course, that it hadn't been fabricated by the priest in the first place – an oracle was a product of spiritualism, a kind of magic that drew supernatural existences into humans acting as divine mediums.

"Next customer, please."

As Suimei was pondering the oracle from the Goddess Arshuna, a voice called out for the next customer in line. There was no one else left but Lefille, and so it seemed to be her turn.

"I guess it's my turn."

Suimei bid her farewell as she stood to rise.

"Good luck."

"Yeah, I hope your commission goes smoothly for you as well," she answered as she approached the reception desk.

"...?"

Why had she suddenly mentioned a commission? This Suimei would come to understand a short while later.

☆

As Lefille finished her conversation, from where he was seated, Suimei watched as she followed the female receptionist further into the guild. Deciding that she must be getting interviewed or something like that, he straightened his appearance a bit when the receptionist called out to him. He rose to his feet and walked over.

“—Welcome to the Twilight Pavilion, the Mehter branch of the adventurer’s guild. This is your first time, I presume?”

“That’s correct. Is it that obvious?” Suimei asked frankly, having been correctly evaluated with a single glance.

She smiled in response, and explained why she’d known.

“Yes. You were looking around with interest: that’s something that only first-timers do. —Now then, what’s the nature of your commission?”

Because the other counters were reserved for people accepting requests, the vast majority of customers at this window were here for this reason.

Urged by the receptionist, Suimei explained his purpose in coming.

“Actually, I’m here to join the guild.”

His response stunned her.

“...Wait, what?”

“I said that I would like to join the guild.”

She must have misheard me. Suimei repeated himself, unaware of why the young lady standing before him had reacted in that way.

An awkward look appeared on her face in response. She kneaded a brow with one hand as she sighed loudly.

In a tone both serious and irritated, she asked, “Um... This might be a bit rude of me to ask, but you do know that this is the Twilight Pavilion of the adventurer’s guild?”

“Yes, I do. Is there something strange about this place?”

“Well, yes. It’s full of many unreasonable things.”

"...?"

Her earlier welcoming attitude had quickly turned cold. Why is she acting like this? All I did was say what I wanted?

As Suimei was lost in confusion, she continued.

"...If this is a prank, you had better stop before going too far. We don't have time to waste on pranks."

"???"

Now she's mad! What the heck? What's going on here? From what he'd read in the novel he'd borrowed from Mizuki, a short conversation was all that was needed to join the adventurer's guild. While it was obvious that reality would diverge from what he'd seen in a fictional work, but Lefille had clearly been led further in without mishap.

Lefille's experience had been extremely smooth, so why had he run into trouble? Had he overlooked something important? The books in Camelia's library had said there weren't any particular documents or qualifications necessary.

As he silently submitted to the receptionist's scolding, he searched his memory for any hint of what he might have missed. Suddenly, a loud, angry roar bellowed forth from behind him.

"Hey! Brat!"

"?"

Suimei turned toward the voice. Standing there was a muscled man with at least ten or twenty centimeters on him. At first glance, he seemed almost like a small mountain. On his back, he carried a claymore, and his

limbs were thick as tree trunks. This man was apparently a warrior.

Following up his roar, the man continued in an enraged, threatening tone.

"You little brat. Did you just say you wanted to join the guild?"

"Ah, yes I did."

"Is that so. Well, for now we'll just pretend it was a dumb joke. Get the hell out."

A word of advice, and an ultimatum. The veins in the man's forehead throbbed as he forcefully told Suimei to leave.

I have no reason to leave, though. Joining the guild was the first step toward exploring this world, something necessary for him to fit in in their world.

To that end, Suimei couldn't afford to anger the other party.

Doing his best to keep his calm, he countered, "But the girl just earlier wanted to join the guild too."

"You're seriously still talking? Even while looking like that, do you really think you're on the same plane as one of us?"

"Yes, I do."

That was indeed the case, after all; what of it?

If he hadn't had confidence in such a thing, then he wouldn't have come in the first place. If he'd retreated after the cold reception just now, then that'd be a different story, but he had no such intentions. Plus, he'd seen other magicians around here, so it didn't seem like it was because he was lacking in physique. Even if he was relatively slender, that shouldn't have been a problem. He honestly couldn't understand what it was that he was

seeing differently from this man.

However the man, seemingly no longer able to stand Suimei's calm assurance was infuriated.

"Do you think this is a joke, you punk? This is a place for warriors and mages, not some moron who doesn't know the first thing about battle!"

"Eh? I've been through my fair share of life-and-death crises, though..."

Suimei was referring to the fact that in his tenure as a magician he'd experienced life-and-death combat more than once. As he spoke, however, something the man had said resonated with him. What was it that guy just said? Warriors and mages. That this was a place where such people gathered.

That part was fine. But as he considered how they set about determining who met such a standard, he suddenly realized what was wrong.

"Warriors...? Ahhhh!"

When he'd purchased his current set of clothing earlier, he'd used those around him as reference. It went without saying that these were people who passed their days peacefully within the walls of the city. They, of course, did not wear armor nor did they carry weapons.

If he thought about it that way, then were anyone who looked as he did to attempt to join the guild, they'd warrant just the reaction he'd gotten. This was a different world, and not the one he'd come from. Here, judging someone by their outer appearance was the norm.

Indeed, Suimei had made a terrible miscalculation when it came to how he was dressed.

“—Craaaaap. I bought the wrong clothes!”

His realization had come too late. Now that things had reached this point, regret was unproductive, for it would do naught to dispel the irritated, hostile gaze lancing through his body.

CHAPTER 13

FIGHT AT THE RECEPTION DESK

Bathed in murderous stares, Suimei found himself in an awkward situation.

The formerly warm receptionist now glared at him coldly while the burly man before him was so angered that his body shook uncontrollably.

The other members of the guild staff, seemingly personally offended, gathered 'round. A dense, threatening pressure enveloped Suimei, this visitor from another world.

Uwaaa, this looks bad...

Suimei groaned inwardly. His choice of clothing had been a terrible blunder. If he were to be scolded for his actions just now, then he'd have to accept it. After all, this was an organization of people who earned their daily bread with their blades; that someone dressed as he was sought to join their ranks was indeed ludicrous. Not only did he look completely normal, but his clothing did as well. No matter what aspect of his appearance you evaluated, you would only see someone without the slightest experience in combat. Adding his smaller Asian physique on top of all of that, and it was only natural that others would see him as nothing more than a delusional child who didn't know his own limits.

However, in the world he'd come from – assuming an organization like the guild existed there – even his current appearance wouldn't have created the predicament he now found himself in. In a world that was home to countless techniques, skills, and weapons; even if you were small of stature, even if you looked completely ordinary, even if you were but a child or one of the elderly, there was always the possibility you were

hiding something incredibly dangerous. Firearms, other weapons, martial arts, magic even – when it came to dangerous things, they were without number.

Although it must be said that a sturdy physique and a ferocious appearance was an advantage of a kind, but it was hardly a decisive factor when it came to real combat, and judging an enemy by their appearance had led many a combatant to their deaths. This was doubly true when magicians – infinitely more terrifying than their opponents, who, outwardly, appeared the more dangerous – were taken into consideration. Compared with such things, the power of one's magic or the trump cards one held were far more important.

Suimei had made his decisions while unconsciously adhering to his own world's standards, acting in concert with what, to him, was only "common sense." This had become a blind spot.

However, there was no reason for people of this world to act this way, and so the oversight this time was entirely Suimei's fault. That notwithstanding, he wasn't going to allow a mistake as small as this to keep him from joining the guild. Registering as a member here was something that had to happen. Moreover, he still had to look for somewhere to stay; he couldn't afford to waste any more time here.

He couldn't just buy a sword and return, though; his appearance had already been seared into their memories by this terrible first impression. Changing his clothes now wouldn't change a thing. They'd just kick him out once more.

As Suimei thought hard, looking for a way out of the current situation, the man's eyes narrowed angrily, and he spoke.

"...Hey, punk. You seem pretty sure of yourself, right?"

"You could say that. I did say earlier that If I wasn't sure of myself, I wouldn't have come here in the first place."

"Is that so. Alright then, let's see what you've got..." the man growled menacingly, as he reached for the sword on his back.

Panicking, the receptionist rushed to stop him.

"W-wait! No matter what he's done, this is still..."

"It should be fine. That guy seems to be getting serious himself."

"B-but guild regulations strictly forbid acts of violence against a normal person!"

"This ain't no 'act of violence.' Anyway, that's only against 'a normal person.' This brat wants to join the guild, right? Then he's not a normal person. That means giving him a little test should be just fine."

"But... even if you say that..."

The man not budging, the receptionist could only stammer a rebuttal. Ignoring her completely, the man prodded Suimei with a question.

"You're serious, aren't you? So this is fine?"

"Pretty much."

Suimei accepted the man's provocation, but couldn't restrain the sigh that came. It was unfortunate that the situation had indeed taken this turn, but given the bloodthirsty atmosphere in the room, the need to demonstrate a bit of force was entirely within expectations.

And so he began planning his next move—

Well, at least this isn't our world. Those Church bastards aren't here, and this is a world where magic lives out in the open. I guess I don't need to bother hiding that much...

To be honest, Suimei's thoughts on how he should approach life in this world had changed drastically over the last few days. At first, he'd planned on keeping his powers as much a secret as he had in his own world. But for these people, magic was a part of daily life. Were he to encounter another opponent who wielded magic, then magic was the most appropriate countermeasure. That it'd occur in a setting without a single bystander was incredibly unlikely. As long as he lived in this world, it was impossible to consider concealing his magic permanently.

Furthermore, magic here was seen as a miracle, a blessing from the gods. Those who saw in magic only a heresy to be destroyed – the Church – were nowhere to be found. Accordingly, any reasons he might have had for concealing his magic weakened considerably. His other concern, that his magic might be seen through and stolen, was similarly a non-concern in this world. Given the woeful state of magic in this world, so unlike his own, as far as he could tell, no one even possessed the ability to understand his magic unless he were to expose its secrets himself.

Simply put, wielding his magic here should be quite safe. Anyway, if he were to successfully become a guild member, his secret would have come out sooner or later. In that case, revealing it now, as opposed to later, made no difference whatsoever.

Although in his heart of hearts, he would have preferred to keep things a secret as long as possible, but as he considered the circumstances, it was also true that the current situation provided an unparalleled opportunity

for him to demonstrate that he had the strength necessary to join the guild. He'd end this predicament with the audience as his witnesses.

As Suimei pondered his options in silence, the man lost his cool and shouted.

"You playing dumb or something? You can't tell the danger you're in?"

"Well, for that to happen, I'd have to be in danger first, wouldn't I?"

Suimei replied calmly.

Rather, he couldn't think how else to react. Calmly expressing that he didn't see any need to worry wasn't an act.

Although the atmosphere might be rather tense, but a pressure of merely this degree was nothing to feel concerned about. As he had testified to earlier, Suimei had already experienced life-and-death battles on more than one occasion. He was a veteran of combat.

The feeling of pressure coming from the man was simply not on the same level as what he'd experienced back home. Going further still, when compared with the sheer rabid fury exhibited by those who believed in God against the magicians, then "open hostility" of this level could practically be considered goodwill. That didn't even include the feeling of being surrounded by military units armed with the latest in modern weaponry, nor did it even approach the threat exhibited by those strange existences they called Monsters, and the forces of nature they wielded.

In comparison, the easy-going threat he felt from the man was a joke. With that said, Suimei recognized that he had simply become too accustomed to horrifying experiences, and that it was for that reason that he felt not the slightest hint of danger.

I wonder what he thinks of me? Perhaps he saw in him an immature brat who didn't know his own limitations, an idiot that was unable to read the atmosphere in the room, or a stubborn fool who didn't know when it was time to back down. As it was standard practice for magicians of his world to completely restrain their mana as part of concealing their identities, it was likely they couldn't even tell he could use magic.

The man snorted.

"Hmph. ...I'm going to start. You'll want to block or dodge this—"

He pronounced the start of the contest. It was only at that moment that the others in the room realized that Suimei seriously intended to go through with this.

If this were just a demonstration of strength, what need would there have been to announce himself? It looked like things had unexpectedly turned serious.

Though still inwardly conflicted, Suimei nonetheless focused himself.

—The man's stance showed that he was about to draw his sword and swing. Watching, he decided it would be trivial to identify the moment when it would leave its scabbard and trace its trajectory.

Targeting the hilt of the sword as the key to victory, he chose the optimal use of his mana. As if casually flicking a bug, he snapped his fingers.

"Guhooo!?"

In an instant, the roar of an explosion and a tragic – not to mention terribly uncute – cry sounded. The impact from the compressed air explosion threw the man's massive frame into the air only for it to come crashing down shortly after. His sword, the hilt of which had been

Suimei's target, was flung from his hands and flew through the air.

The sound of the heavy sword dropping onto the ground rang out at the same time as the man loosed a pained groan.

"Ugh... When did you... S-shit! W-what just happened...?"

Unable to discern the true form of the attack that had hit him, the man gazed around helplessly in confusion.

"Wha...?"

The female receptionist, standing behind him, gave voice to her confusion. Whether she was shocked at the disparity between Suimei's true strength and her image of him, or because she was completely at a loss to explain what had just occurred was unclear.

The match spectators were similarly stunned, their eyes open wide in shock.

"Pardon me, but might I ask what just happened?"

"I used magic."

Suimei replied indifferently to the question posed by the cowering receptionist.

The other party seemed to have finally collected himself, and the man walked over with his hand pressed firmly to his head.

"Magic...? But I never heard an incantation or a keyword...?"

"That's right."

"You've gotta be kidding me..."

"I didn't do anything else besides that."

Suimei's reply was given without a hint of modesty.

Given the reaction he'd just seen, Felmenia's surprise made a lot of sense. To activate magic without either an incantation or a keyword activation was something nonsensical to the people of this world.

—Ceremonial magic. Depending on the occasion, it was known either as ceremonial magic or ritual magic: one of the forms of the magic arts. Although it was categorized as magic, it was nonetheless different from other hidden techniques, astrology, or other types of magic systems. Its use entailed the chanting of phrases with meaning, and required an exact reproduction of the prescribed motions and incantations before it would activate. When described by modern magicians, this form of magic was known as manual magic.

Magic that acted in accordance with predetermined actions and incantations was a very common magic system in modern magic. Summoning magic was perhaps the best example, and it was likely that all the magic of this world fell under this category.

What Suimei had just used however, was a magic from an altogether different system. The snapping of his fingers had been the trigger for this magic. Fulfilling the activation requirements was all that was needed to enact it.

Simple and common, once the magic had been systemized, it was extremely convenient to use.

Magic without either incantation or activation keywords was nothing to magicians of his world.

"Then, you're..."

"Ah, yeah. I apologize for not saying this earlier, but I'm... something like a mage, yes."

At his delayed explanation, a commotion broke out around him.

"A mage... dressed like that?!"

"I've never heard of a magic that didn't need an incantation or a keyword..."

"Oi, don't tell me that guy's actually an amazing mage...?"

...He'd gone a little too far. But still, all he'd done was snap his fingers, really. From the perspective of modern magic, activating a spell with a predetermined action was nothing special. Magic chanted while pointing at one's target or cast with grand motions did exist within his repertoire, but Suimei hadn't wanted to use anything so flashy, though explaining what he'd actually done seemed pretty difficult itself. He decided to ignore their questions instead. Having reached a conclusion, he turned. Facing the receptionist, her gaze colored by surprise, Suimei shrugged.

"Do you believe me now?"

"N-not quite. Your magic was certainly undeniable, but I don't understand why a mage like you isn't wearing a robe or carrying a staff? Aren't those indispensable items for a mage?"

...?

"Hmm? Are those really necessary for mages?"

"...Well, no. Not really, but pretty much every mage uses them still."

"Then who cares? I'm not one to follow tradition just because."

"..."

His answer had been so unexpected that the receptionist didn't know what to say, her mouth open, but with no words forthcoming.

When next...

"T-this isn't a matter of 'just because'! Those things are needed for precise magic control or to ward off other magics, you know?!"

"Well, I do have something equivalent to a mage's robe, but I don't have any need for something like a magic staff. Now, when you're casting something particularly complex, then of course supplementary tools are needed. When it comes to something as simple as fine-tuned control of one's mana, though, then only third-rate magicians would need something to help with that."

"Haaah..."

Suimei's decisive declaration left the receptionist nearly speechless.

Is it really common sense here that mages always have robes and a staff? Because Felmenia hadn't used a staff, he hadn't noticed the latter.

The fact of the matter was, for ages now, the magic staff was considered a tool of absolute importance. According to the records left behind, this was a practice that originated in ancient Egypt, when magic staves in the likeness of those held by their gods became a symbol of their authority. Among the countless examples since, perhaps the most well known were the Celtic Druids. Even in modern times, there were examples such as Mathers' Lotus Wand.

The differences between varying magic systems notwithstanding, the magic staff was an invaluable aid to magicians of all kinds, being particularly common among practitioners of the fire system.

That said, he indeed did not have one – the reasoning for which could be left for a later discussion.

When it came to the necessity of mage robes, items which boosted the defensive capabilities of a wielder of magic, this world and his former one were agreed.

In the Magician's Society, Western formal wear had replaced the robe. With its ability to defend against magic, it was something he had already prepared. Should the occasion require, he was ready to materialize that black-white suit and cloak on a moment's notice.

...A mage's robe and staff.

He didn't avoid them because he felt they were antiquated nor did he have anything against the age-old image of a magician of which they were an integral part. While it was true that items of such a long history didn't seem entirely fitting for a modern magician, that was hardly a reason to discard them.

No, it had been other modern developments that had led them to abandon the robe and staff.

Although they single-mindedly chased after the mysteries of the world as magicians, an ideal that ran directly opposite to that of the science-dominated world they lived in, they had nonetheless been influenced by that same society. New magic tools had been developed to take the place of the old. Walking the path of magic advocated by the head of the Society had led Suimei to where he was today.

The magic staff had become a magic gun, and the robe had become a Western suit. Timeless traditions were important, but searching for ways

to improve upon those traditions and forge them anew was just as important.

Nevertheless, that this had created substantial confusion was undeniable.

"I apologize. I hadn't realized that my choice of clothing would matter that much."

His humble demeanor as he apologized led the man to make a frantic reply of his own.

"N-not at all. It was my mistake for judging you too hastily. I'm very sorry."

"I appreciate your saying that. ...With that settled, am I okay to join the guild now?"

"Ah, yeah. You're a mage so I have nothing to complain about. She'll help you with the rest."

The man walked over and pointed at the receptionist.

Following his lead, "Is that alright?" Suimei asked the receptionist.

"Y-yes. Joining the guild is just fine. I apologize for my rude manner earlier."

"Mm. Don't worry about it. It's not that a big deal..." he answered the young woman, her head bowed out of shame, his tone betraying his confusion.

"No, I truly apologize."

The 180 her attitude had taken was a bit unsettling, but it was understandable.

At this time, the surrounding bystanders who had criticized Suimei earlier

returned to their seats one by one. From the situation, it seemed clear that the matter had been resolved. The man again apologized and took his leave.

"...These are the documents you'll need to fill out. Please enter any required information."

"Got it."

The paper the receptionist handed him asked for some basic information such as his name and age.

As the form didn't ask for anything worth concealing, Suimei took the quill and ink bottle she'd handed him and filled it in before returning it to her.

The receptionist took a quick glance at the sheet.

"So, Yakagi Suimei-san. ...I apologize for my poor manners, but this is a rather unique name, isn't it?"

"I know, right? People are always telling me the same thing."

Suimei smiled wryly at her remark. He was Japanese, after all, and this world was roughly equivalent to Medieval Europe; such a sentiment was only to be expected.

With that said, it was true that this was something he'd heard pretty often. Even in Japan, "Suimei" was a name rarely seen, and he'd been mocked more than once for having such a "glittery" name. No matter where he went, it was a strange name... but that wasn't worth thinking about now.

"You haven't included an address. Might I ask why?" the young woman

asked as she looked over the form.

Just as she'd said, the space for an address had been left blank.

This didn't mean that he intended to stay homeless, but rather that he'd planned to look for housing after this.

"I was planning to look for somewhere to stay after this, so I left it blank for now."

"If you'd like, the guild can provide accomodations?"

Although he appreciated the thought, he'd already made plans, so he shook his head.

"Thanks, but I plan to head for the Nelferian Empire. I'm not going to be in Mehter for that long."

"I see..." the woman answered with a tone of regret.

He wasn't sure what it was she felt regret over, but housing was indeed something that had to be taken care of. He'd go take care of that next.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing. It's just that the guild needs to know how its members are doing, so once you find a more permanent residence, please let us know."

"Will do."

"Okay, Suimei-san. Just to confirm: you wish to be listed as a mage under occupation, correct?"

"Correct."

"Next question, then. Can I ask what your elemental property is?"

The receptionist's casual question left Suimei somewhat perplexed.

"...Is it a problem if I don't specify?"

"It's a guild regulation. Don't worry, though: we won't make such personal information public."

"I see, hrm..."

"Is something wrong?"

The young woman cocked her head, puzzled by the look on Suimei's face. That this question had been asked was common sense in this world. Indeed, back in the palace, overexcited at having learned magic, Reiji and Mizuki had mentioned something about how one's magical affinities were decided at birth. However, having heard this from two who were apparently capable of using every type of magic, he wasn't sure how reliable the information was. Perhaps this was related to that?

From the guild's point of view, wanting to know what its members specialized in was only natural.

At long last, Suimei, an awkward expression on his face, mumbled a reply.

"Well, I'm a little better at fire magic..."

"Fire, is it? But what you used just now was definitely not fire magic..."

"Uh, um... I can use wind magic too."

"I see. So you have dual properties."

"Yeah... Something like that."

Suimei could only give an ambiguous answer. It looked like that was fine for this world, though.

As he'd said, he was indeed better with fire magic. But that was only in a very general manner of speaking. Unlike the restrictions on affinities Reiji and Mizuki had described, he had no problems using other types of magic.

It wasn't like what they'd said had been completely without basis. Even back in their world, because magicians studied different systems of magic, there were indeed magic types they were unable to use.

He, however, was an exception. He was a practitioner of Hebrew numerology, or more specifically, the Kabbalah, which entailed representing all creation with enumeration (Sefirah) and formulas, and using numerical combinations to bring forth magic. Fire magic, water magic, lightning magic... even the reproduction of a phase transition such as the solidification of liquids was possible. As long as the proper procedure was followed and an appropriate amount of mana was used, then any and all phenomena could be reproduced by his magic.

However—

(Properties, huh...)

Only now did he begin to realize just how important a concept this was to the magic of this world. It was true that even from the perspective of modern magic, the doctrine of the four (or five) elements and the five phases was extremely important, considered to be the basic concepts underpinning the world.

Despite that, however, the notion of “properties” was nothing more than a rough indicator of the element to which a magic belonged. As an example, even though fire and water magics were strongly correlated,

just because you couldn't use fire magic didn't mean you couldn't use water magic.

The idea that elemental affinities were innate was a rather basic concept. Although, technically speaking, everyone possessed the potential to use all magic properties, there were still those which were considerably more difficult for a given magician to use. It wasn't hard to imagine that there would be some which were out of reach entirely.

—If we take lighting a fire as an example, while technically people are capable of learning to use all tools, there are undoubtedly some who can start a fire with a match, but who would not know how to do so with a flint. Such a person could be described as having an “affinity” for matches, while being “weak” at flints.

When phrased in terms of magic, matches and flint can be seen as different systems of magic. A fire could be created by borrowing the powers of gods and demons; use of the Sefirah to bring a fire into existence, as Suimei would; through divination methods such as astrology or tarot; or the use of runes or onmyoudou; etc. All could achieve the same result, but which method one employed was a matter of one's affinities. There are inevitably phenomena that one would fail to produce when working with a magic system that one was particularly weak at.

Thus, were one capable of using other magic systems, then being able to use other magic properties became a possibility. It wasn't like it was a certainty that one would be able to use all magic properties, but for Suimei, a modern magician who had encountered many, many magic systems, the notion that it was “impossible” to use all magic properties

was really only a problem of this nature.

He'd heard of modern magicians who focused solely on a single property and were thus unable to use others. Thinking along those lines, it was easy to understand why the mages of this world were limited in their ability to use certain properties and not others. It was likely that the "magic" of this world was dominated by the same magic system that Reiji and Felmenia practiced. Even if there were others, they didn't seem to be large enough to have affected anything.

"By the way, can I ask if Suimei-san can use restoration magic?"

"Hmm? Restoration magic?"

Suimei raised his head at the abrupt question.

An unfathomable look appeared on her face.

"Don't tell me you don't know what restoration magic is?"

"Not quite. While it's not like I don't know anything about it..."

Hearing the term again, Suimei felt that it was somehow different from the term he knew. Perhaps it was just a difference in phrasing and there wasn't really a semantic difference? Anyway, when it came to restoration magic—

It seemed like it was a term encompassing all magics related to recovery magic.

Recovery magic was a vital— no, necessary, power. The ability to heal oneself and others after combat was essential, something that pretty much goes without saying. Back in his original world, the chronic lack of sufficient numbers of magicians who practiced recovery magic had

plagued society throughout history.

He wasn't worried about revealing anything in this regard.

"...With regards to healing magics, I can use energy healing, alchemy, and reconstruction magics."

"Huh? Energy... healing? Alchemy?"

"Yeah. That's right..."

He'd revealed the magics he could use for the time being, but the receptionist seemed confused. Perhaps she hadn't understood the terminology he'd used?

"Um... Sorry, but I'm not that versed in magic, so I didn't really understand what you just said."

...Right.

"Hahaha..."

Of course. Of course this had happened again. Suimei looked like he didn't know what he ought to say.

—Energy healing was a technique for healing injuries with magic.

Sometimes it was known as healing magic or spiritual surgery as its ability to heal injuries extended beyond the physical body to the mind. It was capable even of healing serious illnesses and reconnecting severed limbs. Healing magics were all of this type, while reconstruction magic – as its name suggested – was for restoring broken objects to their original state. It was meant to be used on inorganic things, but to a limited extent, could be used for healing as well.

...The receptionist decided to put aside the issue of these magics she had

never heard of, and asked something else instead.

“Um, what does restoration magic have to do with refining metal?” (Alchemy is “錬金術,” literally “art of refining metals.” As we’ll see in a second, in their world, alchemy deals specifically with the manipulation of metal, hence her question.)

“Because magic potions are produced via alchemy.”

“There are metallic potions?”

What the hell kind of potion is that?! Suimei retorted in his mind before continuing out loud, “...I’m sorry, I’m not that familiar with what ‘alchemy’ means here, would you mind explaining?”

“Oh, um, okay. Alchemy is, as its name suggests, the control of metal via the medium of earth magic. It’s typically used in the creation of metallic objects, the processing of orichalcum, or the creation of the very highest-quality golems. The magic potions you just mentioned, Suimei-san, belong to a different discipline of magic, magical pharmacology...”

“...”

“...Suimei-san?”

“Sorry, it’s nothing.”

—The alchemy of his world had originated with ancient Egypt and Greece. It combined metallurgy, medicine, glass-making, and the chemistry techniques of the time into one enormous body of knowledge. With the development of a medicine granting immortality as its greatest goal, it was said to have amassed the sum total of all of human knowledge at the time under one umbrella.

Afterwards, coming under the influence of the teachings of Hermes and legendary alchemist Paracelsus, alchemy had gradually changed. In its new form, the medicine of immortality had become synonymous with the Philosopher's Stone, and its primary goals had become the refinement of precious metals and the creation of homunculi and reproduction of matter. Understandably, it had become one of the major schools of magic.

Because this world had never had a Hermes Trismegistus or a Paracelsus, it was obvious that the alchemy of this world would be different from that of his world.

Metallurgy and the creation of golems could, at best, only be described as a corollary of the alchemy of his world. He was, however, interested in this "medical pharmacology" that apparently was unrelated to the alchemy of this world. Either way, it was clear that the alchemy of this world was different from the one he was familiar with. If he wasn't careful when speaking, it could cause some complications.

"...R, right. Well then, is it fine if I put you down as capable of restoration magic?"

"Yes."

After a slight nod from him, the receptionist set to writing down the pertinent information on the registration form. Then, clearing the air with a cough, she continued in a business-like tone.

"—Ahem. Excuse me. Next, we'll explain about the adventurer's guild, Twilight Pavilion, and perform a ranking evaluation. The details of the latter will be explained later on by the corresponding personnel; I'll talk about the Twilight Pavilion first."

Suimei nodded, and the young woman began her explanation.

“—The adventurer’s guild, Twilight Pavilion, is the adventurer’s guild primarily operating within the boundaries of the Aster Kingdom, the Nelferian Empire, and the United Sadias Autonomous Territories. The services we render are necessarily as varied as the commissions we accept, though the vast majority fall among one of the following: escort missions for those gathering herbs in dangerous areas, raiding ancient dungeons, exploring frontier regions, and the elimination of monsters. Any questions?”

Suimei’s silence provoked a question of confirmation from the receptionist. Up until this point, everything he’d heard mirrored what he’d read in Camelia’s library.

The adventurer’s guild, Twilight Pavilion, was a special guild with the ability to freely operate within the borders of the three kingdoms. Their headquarters were located in the United Sadias Autonomous Territories, with massive branch locations in both Aster and Nelferia. This was an organization with the authority to accept requests issued by the government itself.

Following along so far, Suimei nodded, signaling the receptionist to continue.

“Then I’ll continue with the explanation, okay? Now, although earlier I’d said that we operate ‘primarily’ within the borders of the three kingdoms, but strictly speaking, members of the Twilight Pavilion are not allowed to operate outside of the three kingdoms. Do you know why?”

The sudden question was unexpected, but not difficult, so Suimei

answered her directly.

"Because other kingdoms are either overtly hostile to the three kingdoms or otherwise view them as enemies, right? Subsequently, Twilight Pavilion members can't easily enter other countries, and moreover, cannot use their guild membership. Were they to do so, it would lead to dangerous circumstances. Something like that."

"That's right. That's why when you leave the three kingdoms, you need to be very careful. If you don't go through proper channels, then it's quite possible that you will be arrested under suspicion of being a spy. Although the relationship between nations has much improved since the demons have attacked, it's still best to be careful."

"Got it."

Something like that occurring was more than possible, and so Suimei expressed his understanding to the receptionist who wore a serious expression as she thrice reminded him of the danger.

"Moving on, our guild uses a grading system to record information about our members. The rankings go from E-rank to S-rank, with members receiving commissions according to their ranking. More specifically, E-rank members are unable to accept D-rank commissions. If you wish to take higher ranked commissions, then completing many tasks will improve your evaluation and allow for a rank up."

"And what is the evaluation based on?"

"While there are many factors, achievements attained while completing commissions is the primary criterion. That is, after all, the kind of organization this is. This much should be expected."

Suimei nodded in reply.

Unsurprisingly, the evaluation of guild members' strength came down to work experience. There were commissions for things like hunting monsters or gangs of bandits, and so something like this was only fair. One would never rise in the ranks without others' positive assessment of one's abilities. Suimei had only planned on accepting suitable commissions anyway, so this wasn't a problem for him.

"Additionally, requests, for the most part, are announced by we members of the guild staff. Please feel free to look over the request board for a job you'd like to do, and then bring it to one of us. At that point, we'll investigate and determine the commission's suitability based on your rank, so please keep this in mind."

Partway through her explanation, Suimei noticed something.

" 'For the most part?' Meaning there are times when commissions are given by assignment?"

"Good job noticing that. Yes. Large-scale commissions which normal staff are unable to bear the responsibility for and commissions of extreme difficulty are handled in this manner. As befits the request in question, we will gather guild members and issue assignments to the appropriate individuals to have the matter taken care of. However, those chosen are either high-ranked members or those who possess special skills. This has nothing to do with you at this point."

"Perhaps," Suimei replied vaguely.

Although even if he'd wanted to take such a request, given that he currently had no achievements to speak of, and had yet to earn the guild's

trust, it was true that such requests were not something he should concern himself with.

"The final item of business concerns your guild membership card. After this, you'll be given a card which serves as proof of your guild membership as well as personal identification. Do not lose it. Were it to fall into the wrong hands, many bad things could be done with it. Please, keep it safe. If the misuse of your card causes harm to the reputation of the guild, you will be punished accordingly. Please be careful."

"Will do."

"One final note. The design of the membership card changes depending on your rank, and so during times when your rank is being evaluated or changed, we will need your card back. We apologize for any inconvenience that that might cause."

Finished with her explanation, the receptionist breathed deeply.

"That does it for the introduction to the guild, next up will be the ranking evaluation. Please take a seat beyond that door there and await your examination," she said, indicating the door in question with her hand.

As directed, Suimei walked over to the inner door.

CHAPTER 14

THE ASSESSMENT IS A BATTLE... OF COURSE IT IS...

Suimei, having been instructed by the receptionist that he was to undergo an assessment, took a seat in the hallway connecting to the inner halls of the adventurer's guild.

A lantern dimly lit the room, filling him with a deep sense of déjà vu.

—The feeling of a hospital at night.

As Suimei was struck by this feeling so unrelated to this world, while sitting sternly on the chair with his back straight, a staff member emerged from within the hallway depths. It was a girl with fluffy, tawny hair, dressed in the same guild uniform the receptionist had worn.

Before long, the girl had reached his side, and inclining her head, asked, “—Um, Suimei Yakagi-san, right?”

“Yes, that's me.”

Suimei gave a frank nod. The girl's expression brightened and a gentle smile touched her lips as she introduced herself.

“Sorry about that. My name is Dorothea, and I'm in charge of guiding new recruits. Pleased to meet you.”

“Ah. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

With this girl, both respectful and amiable, he maintained the polite tone he'd used with the receptionist earlier.

There was a world of difference between the way she treated him and the way he'd been treated outside. As Suimei reflected on the contrast,

Dorothea smiled happily and spoke again.

"Oh, there's no need for such formality. Please speak normally. We're about the same age, so it's fine."

"...Is that okay? Wouldn't that be rude?"

"It's fine, it's fine~ This is easier on me too, not to mention it's my job to make it easier on nervous new recruits worried about the assessment. Although, I have to say, it doesn't really look like that last part applies to you, Suimei-san."

"Haha... Alright then. It's nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too!" Dorothea responded with great enthusiasm, Suimei having agreed to her request.

"Let's go for a walk," she continued, leading the way down the hall with Suimei following closely.

She suddenly turned to face him, apparently struck by a sudden thought.

"Oh, the form from earlier – I looked over your registration form. Suimei-san, you're a mage, and one with both fire and wind properties, right?"

"Oh, yeah. More or less."

" 'More or less' is it? You sure are modest. Didn't you cast magic without an incantation or even a keyword and send Roha-san flying? You must be a pretty amazing mage?"

"No, no, nothing like that. I was in a bit of crisis, so I did it unconsciously. It's something that only happens on occasion," Suimei answered, the smile on his face matching her own.

The aforementioned "Roha-san" was the claymore-wielding man from

earlier, huh. He'd beaten him so quickly that he'd been unable to gauge his abilities; perhaps he was actually a person of some renown in the guild? Not wanting to draw too much attention, he'd attempted to hide behind a facade of modesty, but it seemed his actions had been misunderstood.

"Hmm... From what I know, though, magic isn't something as temperamental as you make it sound..."

She frowned as she thought hard. What Suimei had said seemed off to her. Her words demonstrated that she knew quite a bit about magic.

In that case, what should he say to dispel her doubts? He didn't want to leave a bad impression on her, so he decided a suitable explanation was warranted.

"...Incantations aside, it's possible to activate magic in other ways. Moreover, the magic I used wasn't anything amazing."

"Really?"

"It's common knowledge, you know?"

This would likely prevent further inquiries. Rather than appear a suspicious individual who was clearly hiding secrets, it was better to give what appeared to be a plausible explanation.

Dorothea wasn't likely to dig deeper than that, and indeed she did not. Instead, she changed the topic.

"Suimei-san, you sound just like a lecturer on magic. —Do you mind if I ask something? If not by incantation, then how else can magic be activated?"

"That's a secret."

"Hmph. You're surprisingly stingy, Suimei-san."

"Are there really people that expose their secrets so easily?" Suimei replied with a shrug.

Dorothea seemed to accept that answer.

"I guess that's true," she said, before switching topics yet again. "...I have to say, though... While Roha-san is definitely a rather impulsive person, but sudden incidents like the one earlier sure have been happening a lot more lately."

Dorothea's remark seemed intended to alleviate some of the blame Suimei may have placed on the guild staff. This led Suimei to ask a question of his own.

"...There are really that many people who play pranks?"

"Yeah, there really are. There are those who approach the reception window dreaming of the adventurer's life despite not having the least bit of combat ability, as well as more unpleasant types who only care about the advantages of guild membership. I think it might be due to the Hero's appearance, but starting from three days ago, there's been a lot more of them."

It seemed like this had caused a lot of trouble for guild staff, causing Dorothea to sigh heavily as they walked. For humanity, disheartened as it was in the wake of the fall of Noxeas at the hands of the demons, the summoning of the Hero had been like a shot in the arm. He wasn't quite sure what most people thought of the Hero, but if their feelings were anything like those in the city, then lack of evidence notwithstanding,

they likely viewed his existence as the symbol of their victory. Indeed, they had likely been inspired to think that with a little effort, they could do anything. For that reason, a number of people had likely been “infected” to the point that they’d lost sight of reality and begun to think that will could take the place of ability.

It had been this rabid enthusiasm that had caused the incident earlier.

“Does that mean I’m going to run into people like that where we’re going?”

In his mind, he envisioned a crowd of chuunibyou-suffers gathered together.

“Nope. You’re the last person left to be evaluated today. Everyone else has finished already.”

“...I see.”

“Something strange about that?”

“...No, it’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

Suimei waved off the issue before the puzzled Dorothea, prompting her to change the topic yet again.

“Oh, that reminds me, Suimei-san. Did you happen to see the Hero during the parade?”

“Well, I guess you could say that...”

Or rather, the sight of that face had been a daily occurrence for him before – but it went without saying that this was something that ought not be shared.

Dorothea seemed admiring.

“Reiji-sama, right? He really has just this indescribable aura to him, as expected of one called Hero. From what I’ve heard, every generation of Hero seems like they just about embody courage and justice.”

As she spoke, she suddenly stopped and closed her eyes, an expression of yearning on her face. She must have been reliving the moment of the parade.

Within the figure of the Hero that had burned itself into her memory, had she found hope? Since Suimei had spent his days by Reiji and Mizuki’s side, he’d had no such feeling, but perhaps things weren’t the same for Dorothea and others like her.

Suimei asked another question of her, whose attitude toward the Hero was perhaps representative of the people.

“Dorothea, do you really think the Hero will destroy the Maou and his armies?”

“If the fabled power of the legendary Hero is real, then I don’t think that should be a problem.”

“What do the stories say?”

His follow-up question prompted a look of surprise from Dorothea, and her eyes opened wide.

“You don’t know yourself, Suimei-san?”

“Unfortunately not, I’m sorry to say.”

This wasn’t something that Suimei actually felt sorry for, but he decided that an apologetic tone was the right one to take for the time being.

Legends about the Hero were obviously something commonly handed

down by the people. Watching Dorothea's reaction, Suimei felt that perhaps the stories of the Hero were as near to the hearts of the people as the legends and fairytales of his own.

"...How unexpected," she replied, her sentiment not unexpected, before beginning to explain. "The strength of the one called Hero is something that can be found both in the history books as well as the legends passed down among our people. Throughout history, there have been a number of times when the world has faced a dire crisis, and the people of the world have responded by summoning a Hero. The Hero in battle is a glorious sight. The stories include tales of past Heroes cutting giants as tall as mountains in two with a single strike, using flying magic to chase after mad despots, or cutting down the black, beast-like Maou with a holy sword."

"Haa—"

Her words piqued his interest, not just for their own sake, but because they also spoke something of Reiji and Mizuki's situation. It was only natural that he would be interested, really. He would have to investigate more thoroughly later on.

"And what do you think, Suimei-san?"

"Hmm?"

The sudden question had caught him off guard. Essentially suggesting that it was his turn to speak, she continued.

"About the Hero and the Maou suppression force. Do you think they can do it, Suimei-san?"

"...That's a good question. If the current Hero is really like those in the

stories you mentioned, then it should be possible. The problem is whether or not that matches the current reality.”

“Do you think they can do it?” my ass. Reiji and the others definitely can’t do those kinds of things, so there’s no way things will go as smoothly as they do in those stories.

“Oh, you don’t agree?”

“No, it’s not that. More specifically, I think it’s naive to presume that victory will come simply because the Hero exists. Whether or not they will succeed is not something anyone can know for certain...”

Suimei, as one with a precise understanding of the current situation, was rather uneasy. If one truly believed that receiving an enormous power was enough to guarantee victory, that only served to demonstrate how little one truly knew about battle.

Suimei’s eyes narrowed in worry.

“Such thoughts are best left unsaid when you’re outside. If the believers of the Church of Salvation, who hold the heroes to be the emissaries of the Goddess Arshuna, were to hear you, you’d be in for quite the sermon.”

“Haha... I’ll be careful.”

This again. Lefille had said the same thing. It seemed that to the people of this world, sermons from the Church were something to be feared to the point that they presented as a tangible threat. For the sake of what his goals, he’d have to be very careful from now on.

Dorothea’s expression changed. Her look of reprimand was replaced with a look of agreement.

“That said, what you said is certainly true, Suimei-san. Indeed, most of the adventurer’s guild isn’t nearly that optimistic. Either way, it’s a truth that the Hero’s radiant appearance has affected things greatly. It’s not just the knights or foot soldiers that have seen a rapid increase in applications to join their ranks, over the last few days, we’ve received several times more applicants than normal.”

“And so the receptionist tried to get me to leave, right?”

“Right. Suimei-san, at the very least, you should carry a magic staff with you. Even those unqualified applicants of late have brought appropriate equipment with them, let alone a card carrying member of the guild like yourself. It’s completely unheard of.”

“Sorry for that, really. I’m reflecting on my actions.”

If actions had simply not been thought through properly that was one thing, but this time, he’d also failed to take note of his surroundings, a rather serious oversight.

His head hung as he sighed inwardly. Dorothea stuck out her chest and spoke.

“It’s fine if you understand. It’s not like it was that big a deal anyway.”

Unexpectedly, this girl had quite an insensitive side to her.

“—Even if you say that, that was a pretty violent way just to get someone to leave, wasn’t it?”

This was something that Suimei had been concerned about the entire time. Even if you wanted to escort someone from the building, the way they’d gone about it had been overhasty, to say the least. Perhaps this was simply because Suimei was too accustomed to the polite service

mentality of his own world, but even then, what was the deal with this world?

"You're referring to the way the guild staff acted?"

"Yes. Doing things this way could really hurt your guys' reputation. If others like me were to receive the same treatment, but not take it the way I did, then the guild could miss out on some promising recruits, right?"

Unexpectedly, she replied indifferently, "If someone were to back down just because of something like that, then we have no interest anyway. It's not like we're hurting for numbers."

Her response had been clear cut and unhesitating. Responding to the other issue he'd raised, she added, "Also, bad rumors circulating about the adventurer's guild is the norm."

"Because of the successes of the Twilight Pavilion?"

"Yes."

Her tone suggested she wasn't bothered in the least.

"Any other questions?"

Of course he did. About that which he could not avoid—

"So what exactly does the assessment involve?"

He directly bared his concern. In those novels that Mizuki was so fond of, guild registration for people from another world always involved putting your hand on some crystal that measured mana or some other crazy thing to that effect. This world, it seemed, was the same.

As if she'd been awaiting this question the entire time, Dorothea's answer was energetic indeed.

“With a battle, of course!”

“Of course!” my ass!



Not long after she'd answered his question, Suimei passed through a set of doors as prompted by Dorothea. Appearing before his eyes was an enormous indoor training field.

“No wonder the guild takes up so much room. There was something like this here.”

Suimei's muttered words elicited agreement from Dorothea.

“That's right. This is the largest adventurer's guild in the three kingdoms, after all. Of course we'd have facilities like this prepared.”

A training field. Given what he knew of the strength of the guild's members, something like this was necessary.

But—

“It's empty?”

Just as he'd said, the field was currently unoccupied. Although there did seem to be someone behind the doors located within.

“Before noon, this second training field is reserved for assessment purposes. No one else is allowed to use it. Those who have already finished their assessment should be in that room there, finishing up their registration.”

“Ah...” Suimei replied calmly.

Suddenly, noticing that the feeling transmitted by his feet was somehow strange – or rather, the entire room gave him a strange feeling – he

looked down.

“Excuse me, but this material...”

“Good job noticing that. This training room was constructed with a newly-discovered, magic-resistant material. Even if you use magic in here, the building won’t be easily damaged,” she answered proudly.

“Magic-resistant material?”

“Right. It’s still very new, so it’s only in use here. Awesome, right?”

“Yeah. So something like this exists...”

Suimei’s calm response completely ignored Dorothea, who was nearly bursting with pride.

His nonchalant tone notwithstanding, his gaze remained fixed on the floor. The floor and walls were, as far as he could tell, simply a mix of wood and stone. Could this really be the so-called magic-resistant material? Back in his world, magic-treated materials were quite common, but from his inspections, this material bore no traces of magic treatment. If its magic resistance was an innate property, then that really was something worthy of interest.

As Suimei looked around interestedly, Dorothea interrupted.

“As I mentioned earlier, the match will be held here. Suimei-san, we’ll have you fight against guild members of our choosing, and your rank will be based on our assessment of your performance during the match. Is that okay?”

“Well, it’s not like I have a problem with that... but, speaking hypothetically – just as an example – is there any other assessment

method besides battle?”

“Hah... That’s a bit of a difficult question. Actually, let me ask you a question in turn: if not a battle, then what?”

Yeah, there wasn’t anything else, was there?

“...Okey-dokey.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, I’m just saying that I understand.”

Dorothea not understanding his answer, Suimei explained that he’d been answering in the affirmative. Even though Japanese translated without difficulty, apparently loanwords didn’t work. As he ruminated on the inefficiency of communication, he raised his head to gaze up at the wooden ceiling. Looking back, Dorothea still looked a bit confused. (In the original, the term Suimei used that she didn’t understand was “おーけー,” i.e. “okay.” I thought about using an equivalent from another Romantic language as it makes more sense relative to English... except that “okay” is essentially a part of every language on Earth by now >_> so I went with a less-known form.)

“Ha... If you say so. Now then—”

Just as Dorothea was about to continue, they sensed activity from the inner room. The doors opened and someone stepped out.

Having noticed their presence, the newcomer called out to them.

The voice that reached their ears was like the tinkling of a silver bell, a voice like a gentle breeze—

“Is that Suimei-san?”

"Oh, Gurakis-san. We meet again."

Looking their way was the person he'd met earlier for a decidedly unique reason, Lefille Gurakis.

Her bright red hair flowing behind her as she approached, she frowned at Suimei's greeting, a look of shock on her face.

"What brings you here?"

"They tell me I'm to undergo an assessment of some kind."

"...Huh?"

"Something wrong?"

"...You weren't here to submit a request?"

"Oh..."

Facing Lefille's surprised look, Suimei finally understood. That was what she'd meant earlier.

Back when they'd separated at the reception desk, she'd wished him well with his "commission." She'd misunderstood. Thinking back, now he understood the reason for her words.

Wanting to dispel the misunderstanding as quickly as possible, Suimei again explained his goal.

"Actually, I'm like you Gurakis-san: I'm here to join the guild. Oh, by the way, I'm basically a mage."

"I see now. You weren't carrying any weapons, so I'd thought..."

"...I'm sorry. Really, really sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?"

"Don't worry about it."

Of course this had happened. Talk about reaping what you sow. The words that he'd heard not so long ago struck me deeply.

Watching the two speak with familiarity, Dorothea interrupted.

"Are you two friends?"

"No, we actually met for the first time just outside, at the reception window."

"Oh, I see," Dorothea replied.

Suimei then asked a question of Lefille, who had just answered Dorothea.

"Gurakis-san, how'd your assessment go?"

"Ahh, I just finished, actually."

"And the result?"

"Not bad."

As she replied, her eyes closed and she smiled valiantly. From the looks of it, her "not bad" wasn't a "I managed to get by" so much as a "I didn't have to go all out." She didn't look tired, nor was she breathing heavily.

Once Dorothea realized who Lefille's opponents had been, she looked simultaneously stunned and distressed.

"You fought those two and you can still say 'not bad'? Those two are considered real masters around here, you know?"

"Really? I just fought like normal."

" 'Like normal,' is it... Lefille-san, it sure is a pity you don't plan to stick around."

"...? You're heading somewhere else?" Suimei, surprised by Dorothea's comment, unwittingly asked Lefille.

"Ah, about that—"

"Sorry to interrupt you two, but it's about time for us to get started here. Is that alright?"

Concerned about the time, Dorothea's question drowned out Lefille's answer. On that note, they had spent quite some time conversing as they walked.

It seemed continuing to while away the time like this would create problems for others.

"Ah. I'm ready whenever."

"Understood. —Then, Raikas-san and Enmarph-san! If you would!"

Dorothea suddenly called out, having turned to face the depths of the training field.

Voices called out in return, and two men walked out from within the inner room doors. One was a leather armor-clad warrior who carried a two-handed sword while the other was dressed in a robe and carried a staff in one hand, a mage by the looks of it.

Her statement seemed directed at this pair, making them his match opponents for the assessment. The only thing was—

"There's two of them?"

"Yes. Please select your opponent from between Raikas-san and Enmarph-san. Raikas-san is a warrior and Enmarph-san is a mage. Although their specialties are different, they're both very skilled, and either should be

just fine for assessing your strength.”

“Hmm...”

As she finished speaking, Suimei took the opportunity to evaluate the pair. Magical power, presence, menace. Neither one gave him the frightening chill that accompanied opponents whom he dare not let his guard down around. Suimei calmed himself and approached.

Suddenly, the warrior – Raikas-san, it seemed? – called out in a resentful tone.

“You’re the new guy?”

“Yeah.”

“Name? Occupation?”

“My name is Yakagi Suimei. I’m basically a mage.”

Reacting to the hostile tone, Suimei’s manner grew a fair bit rudier. His short answer caused Raikas to look at him with suspicion.

“Huh? What’s that ‘basically’ supposed to mean?”

“That ‘basically’ is a matter of personal feeling. Don’t worry about it.”

“Ha. Is that so?”

Suimei wasn’t sure why, but Raikas had been overtly hostile and haughty. Was this because he was in a bad mood or was he just that kind of person? His manner was decidedly crude. The mage Enmarph was the same. Although he had yet to speak a word, the air was thick with nervous tension.

Raikas turned to face Lefille.

"...You. You're still here?"

"Ah. I was chatting with them for a bit."

Raikas' eyebrows jerked and he spun to face Suimei once more.

His hardline attitude seemed to have worsened considerably, and he now looked like Nio.

"You know this person?"

"Huh? Yeah, I guess you could say that..."

As Suimei was trying to decide if he ought to clarify that they were newly met acquaintances rather than old friends, Raikas voice dropped several degrees and his next words took on a dangerous tone.

"...I see. Someone you know."

"...?"

"You know her? Right?"

What's with this atmosphere? Looking over, Suimei could feel a similarly hostile attitude from Enmarph. What the hell is going on?

As he replayed events in his mind, an idea occurred to him.

Turning to Lefille, he asked, "Don't tell me... Gurakis-san, the two you beat were..."

"Yeah, it's what you're thinking. The two I beat are these two. ...This is pretty much because of me. Sorry about that."

"As expected..."

The answer was entirely expected, but Suimei couldn't help but sigh anyway.

CHAPTER 15

AN UNAVOIDABLE BATTLE

Just what part of an encounter like this is any different from the hostile reception I got earlier? The number of people who had gotten mad at him as well as the reasons for their anger were in a different category altogether from earlier, and yet he felt like this situation was repeating itself time and again. The pair were openly hostile, venting their anger on an innocent victim, leading the victim in question – Suimei – to sigh. The chancellor, the receptionist, and now these two. Today was apparently his day to be immersed in hateful glares.

From what he'd just heard, Lefille's opponents during her ranking assessment had been these two. One was the warrior named Raikas, and the other a magician named Enmarph.

The ranking assessment was also meant to be a time when Twilight Pavilion adventurers could ask for pointers on battle technique. Originally, new recruits were to select a single opponent against whom to compete. Lefille, however, had instead fought them both one after another.

The result was obvious, and could be determined with a quick glance. If you ignored Lefille's slender sword and finely-crafted light armor, then what was left was a young lady with the beauty of a butterfly or flower. Given their poor attitude toward a girl of such nature, their loss must have been appalling indeed.

Dorothea and the pair finished speaking, their consultation having come to an end.

"—So it's my turn now, right?" Suimei asked, somewhat rudely.

If they were going to treat him like this, then he had no need to be polite.

"Yeah," Raikas replied.

"What kind of battle is it going to be?"

"The guild doesn't set any guidelines with regards to that. There just needs to be a battle, and then we give our assessment. End of story."

Whether because he found the question annoying or because he was in a bad mood, Raikas' answer had been both short and sharp.

The grim look on Raikas' face notwithstanding, Suimei asked another question.

" 'There just needs to be a battle' – that means a straightforward battle should be just fine, right?"

"Yeah. The only rule is that real weapons can't be used during the assessment. Since you're a mage, that means you use a magic staff. Hmm... Well, if you have one on hand, just use that. Just remember that regardless of what kind of magic you use, you're not allowed to cause major injuries or kill anyone. It's not like you could do something like that with us as your opponents anyway, though. Ain't that right, Enmarph?"

"...Not a problem."

In answering Raikas' question, this was Enmarph's first time speaking. He was probably originally a man of a taciturn nature, but the look on his face was identical to Raikas' – that of utter self-confidence.

Suddenly, an unknown voice taunted, "You say that, but didn't you just get your butts kicked?"

It was Dorothea. Surprisingly, she was a pretty daring young girl.

"Shut it! No one asked you anything!" Raikas roared.

A wordless rage could be felt emanating from his person. Dorothea responded by sticking out her tongue and scratching her head. This girl really likes to fan the flames, doesn't she...

"So? Who's it going to be? If you don't choose, then we're going to decide between us."

"..."

"And? What's it going to be?!"

"Well..."

...Maybe there wasn't really any point in thinking too hard about this.

From the time he'd arrived in this world until now, he hadn't really fought an opponent without magic. He'd seen Reiji and the knights engage in mock combat many times, but watching something and taking part yourself were two entirely different things. Plus, he'd thought to himself on more than one occasion that he'd love to take part in just such a battle. With that in mind, this training field match was the perfect opportunity. Lefille would leave soon enough, and that'd leave him alone with them. He already knew how he was going to clean up after himself once the battle was over.

Moreover, if he were to take care of things here, then he might just be able to muddle up accounts of what had occurred earlier, at the reception desk.

That makes this a real opportunity, doesn't it?

In an instant, Suimei concluded that even if Dorothea hadn't added fuel to the fire by making provocative statements, the end result would still be the same.

"Although this is probably asking a bit much, but... I want to fight both of them. At the same time."

"—Ohh?"

"What?!"

Lefille's interest seemed to have been piqued by his answer, while Dorothea shouted in surprise.

The expressions of the other pair, the ones he had just challenged, also changed.

"...Huh? You want to fight us at the same time? You punk, are you really serious?"

"Hmph. I hate jokes that aren't funny."

Unsurprisingly, Suimei's calm words only served to worsen Raikas' already extremely foul mood.

"Maybe if you had the strength of that woman, but a weak little mage like you thinks you can beat us? Don't tell me you let sending that guy flying earlier go to your head?"

"..."

Enmarph's gaze was piercing, easily a match for Raikas' visible outrage. Suimei had already anticipated this reaction. For adventurers as confident in their abilities as these two were to be challenged by a green brat blowing hot air, of course things had taken this turn.

However, they'd been showing him disrespect since the very beginning. As such, this was nothing more than giving them a taste of their own medicine. Perhaps an outsider would have seen such a choice as despicable, but he had his own goals to achieve, and in light of that, he wasn't going to place that much emphasis on worrying about how other people felt.

Sensing the tension in the air, Dorothea, unable to control her voice, asked, "Um, Suimei-san. Are you really sure about this?"

"Ah, yeah, this is what I want. I have to go look for somewhere to stay after this, so I'd like to take care of things as quickly as possible."

"That's not what I meant—"

"You have the confidence to beat us quickly, do you?" Raikas interrupted, cutting Dorothea short.

"Yeah."

"What a ridiculous claim."

"It's not really that big a deal. Just like you guys have confidence in your abilities as adventurers, I have pride in the path I've walked to get here. Excessive modesty isn't good for my mental health, after all."

"...You little brat. If you continue to overestimate your own strength, then you'll be beaten to a pulp. Take back this stupid joke and choose your opponent. You can still be forgiven."

Raikas again threatened Suimei, warning him to take back his words. Suimei, having said this much already, wasn't about to give up so easily though.

"No. I will not. And I have no intentions of seeking your forgiveness."

"...You'll regret it."

"I appreciate the warning."

"Hmph. Enmarph, we can't let this little punk look down on us like this. Let's crush him!"

"...Got it."

Suimei's uncaring shrug enraged Raikas beyond all reason and provoked a furious response from Enmarph. Raikas, meeting his partner's eyes, sent a murderous glare Suimei's way. Enmarph's gaze was no less penetrating. In this manner, the two walked over to the center of the training field.

(...)

...He'd been the target of their anger from the very beginning. That said, he had also ignored their goodwill, and stubbornly boasted of his own ability. By the time he'd noticed, things had already gone past the point of no return. If he kept this up, then eventually there would come a day when his actions would come back to haunt him.

The circumstances of where he was had also contributed to the current situation. As a magician, he wasn't the least bit worried, but it was also the truth that the current situation was exactly what his opponents wanted. As men, they couldn't bear to lose to an immature brat. Suimei was distinctly aware of all of this, but he couldn't help but follow this train of thought nonetheless.

As the situation grew more serious yet, a voice called out from behind him.

“Suimei-kun. Those two are pretty strong. Are you sure this is okay?”

Lefille asked as he approached the training field.

Is that because she’s worried about me fighting them at the same time or because she’s probing my true strength?

Suimei nodded in her direction.

“Yes.”

“You have the confidence to face them at the same time?”

“Sadly, it’s pretty hard to imagine given how ordinary I look, isn’t it?”

As he mocked himself in answer, Lefille unexpectedly smiled.

“It certainly is.”

“—You answered so fast! How cruel.”

So that’s how she saw him. Her blunt words caused them both to erupt in laughter.

“Hehehe...”

“Hahaha...”

Surprisingly, they seemed to be quite compatible indeed. The Goddess Arshuna’s guidance sure is miraculous, Suimei mused to himself.

“...Anyway, fighting them both at once is in line with my aims. This works out perfectly.”

“...I see. Alright then. I won’t say any more.”

Lefille nodded, before unexpectedly turning to Dorothea.

“Excuse me, but can I watch this from the sidelines?”

“Wuh?”

Completely and utterly shocked, something that wasn't even a word unwittingly left Suimei's mouth.

"That's not a problem, but Suimei-san, you probably don't want someone watching you, right?" Dorothea asked, after straightforwardly giving her assent to Lefille.

"Oh... No, it's okay."

"If it's okay, then why does your face look like that?"

"Oh, this has nothing to do with that. I was just really taken aback is all."

"Really?" Dorothea asked, cocking her head in confusion.

Having received permission, Lefille nodded delightedly.

"Great. Let's see what you can do."

Lefille seemed fully intent on watching. His upcoming battle against both opponents at once seemed to have stirred her warrior's spirit.

His magic was about to be seen by others. Although he already knew how he was going to take care of that, he couldn't help but tsk inwardly even as he walked over to the center of the training field.

And then—

"Alright. Is everyone ready?"

"...Yeah."

"..."

"I'm all good here."

Raikas pulled his sword from its scabbard and Enmarph shifted into a combat stance, pointing the gemmed tip of his staff toward Suimei.

As they had, Suimei expressed his readiness to begin, simultaneously pulling his Divergent Gloves over his hands and extracting a vial from his pocket.

Raikas, not comprehending what he was seeing, asked, "What's that?"

"Nothing special. It's just my weapon."

"...?"

Under the surprised and confused gazes of those around him, Suimei removed the stopper from the vial and poured its contents onto the floor. This was, of course, the same thing he'd used in the White Wall, the handiest of the magic weapons within his possession.

Because of the extreme novelty of the vial's contents, Lefille frowned at the glittery, silver substance.

"Silver... water?"

"This is mercury. You've never seen it before?"

"Yeah, this is my first time," she answered, squinting.

"Um, Suimei-san, intentionally dirtying the floor is kinda..." Dorothea said weakly.

"...Oh, no. I'm not dirtying anything."

"That sure is what it looks like, though..."

Under everyone's watchful gaze, he'd poured a liquid onto the floor. That much was undeniable, however..

"You'll understand soon enough."

"Hah..."

“...Hmm. Is that some kind of drug?”

“Nope—”

By the time he'd answered Lefille's question, the contents of the vial had completely transferred themselves onto the floor. Next, as this extremely dense liquid slid along the floor, he concentrated his mana, and spoke the incantation that would alter its form.

“—Permutatio Coagulatio Vix Lamina (Transmute, solidify, become power.)”

His incantation spoken, with the mercury on the floor at its radius, a magic circle spread outward.

A magic circle that radiated with a soft red, magical light.

“—!”

“Wha?!”

“Eh?”

“...!?”

As he operated his magic, four different exclamations of surprise reached his ears. They were probably surprised by his ability to construct a magic circle without drawing it first, much as Felmenia had been.

“Alchemy...” muttered Enmarph, the mage.

It seemed that he understood what Suimei was about to do. Under the direction of the light emitted by the magic circle, the mercury pulled and drew itself upward like so much clay, before finally landing in Suimei's hands in the shape of a sword.

“—This is my weapon.”

Sure enough, this had answered Lefille's question. Suimei then focused, readying himself for the battle ahead. There was no room for retreat here. With his gloved hands, Suimei took up his sword of quicksilver and shifted into a combat stance, meeting Raikas' doubting eyes.

"...Hey you. Weren't you a mage?"

"You saw my magic just now and you still don't believe?"

"Because you're a mage holding a sword. ...Actually, do you even know how to use that thing?"

Raikas' question reminded him that Felmenia had wondered the same thing. It seemed like the idea of a magician warrior was unheard of in this world. Their "common sense" reminded him of a game or a story almost, where magicians took up positions in the rearguard and warriors served as the vanguard. Then again, seeing as magic and close combat were two entirely different domains, it was probably natural to think that way—

"Well, I know a thing or two."

"I see."

Suimei smiled unworriedly at Raikas, who didn't respond, seemingly fed up with talking. Seizing the opportunity, Dorothea raised her arm.

And then—

"Begin!"

At Dorothea's command, the offensive began. Raikas' first attack was easy to follow. Racing forward, he slashed diagonally at Suimei.

Suimei mirrored his action.

“Ha—”

Snorting in laughter, Raikas couldn't see anything special about Suimei's attack. The difference in their arm strength could be seen with a glance, just looking at their relative arm sizes would tell you as much.

Suimei could read from Raikas' cold smile that he believed he'd obtained victory, but the final result was something that only he had foreseen. Just as their swords were about to cross, Suimei sidestepped to the left, let the strength go out of his arms, and allowed his sword to follow Raikas' backwards. Seizing the opening thus created, he spun a full circle and from his new position, to the southeast of where he was originally standing, he slashed at his opponent once more.

“Wha?!”

Raikas' reaction was a moment too late, and he lost his opportunity to correct his stance, instead being forced by the momentum of both his body and his sword to stagger forward.

What had just happened was completely unexpected. It had been a marvelous technique which specifically targeted an opponent's attack and destroyed their balance, causing their attack to fail.

This move turned things around completely. Suimei didn't let the opportunity go to waste. With a flip, he unleashed an attack at Raikas' defenseless back. Raikas, on the other hand, was slow to react. He seemed to regret the price for his carelessness. Suimei, however, realized that he would not have the opportunity to finish his opponent.

That was because there was still someone glaring at him from behind, like a predator eying its prey.

“—O wind. Focus thy eternal power which crushes all before thee.
Unleash thy wrath upon mine foes! Wind Fist!”

“Secundum Excipio! (Second bulwark, local activation!)”

Abandoning his attack without the least hesitation, Suimei activated a defensive magic to stop the progress of the enormous gale blowing at him with all the force of a giant’s punch.

The magic he’d used had been the resplendent, golden fortress wall. It was a defensive technique which specialized in magic defense.

“Wha—!?”

A shout of surprise, its source unclear, entered Suimei’s ears. Suimei, keeping his sword pointed directly at Raikas, had stretched out his left arm behind him, a golden defensive magic activating with his palm at its center. The cannonball of compressed air struck his magic circle dead on before dispersing without causing any damage to his magic whatsoever. Moments was all it had taken for this offensive magic of terrifying power to be rendered useless.

His expression twisting at the thought of his carelessness, Raikas seized the moment, pulling back and fixing his posture before speaking.

“Hmph. Your swordsmanship’s pretty strange.”

“I picked it up from a dojo near where I live.”

Just as Suimei delivered his response with great composure—

“What the hell was that?! That magic?!” Enmarph screamed, his expression having changed drastically.

Taken aback by Enmarph’s look of shock, Suimei narrowed his eyes.

"...My defensive magic?" he asked, surprise in his voice.

"I've never heard of anything like that before! You, just now, you...!"

"What? Something strange about it?"

Suimei couldn't figure out what Enmarph was talking about, all the more so because the latter was so startled that he wasn't able to speak properly.

The brilliant golden fortress was a type of defensive magic. It was a masterpiece of his own creation, designed to be effective against any kind of attack, an unyielding frontal fortification. That said, it was nothing more than a defensive magic, however brilliant; if it wasn't the magic itself, was it perhaps the sudden appearance of the magic circle that had so amazed Enmarph? No, they'd already seen him do that moments earlier.

So why had he cried out like that?

"It's not just weird, it's—"

Enmarph's shock so complete that he was apparently no longer capable of finishing his sentences, Dorothea took over explaining on his behalf.

"But Suimei-san! That magic just now, you activated it without a property?!"

"...Well, yeah. I didn't give it a property, after all. It's a defensive magic; adding a property would be meaningless, wouldn't it?"

Indeed, magical properties were meaningless when it came to defensive magics. If you wanted to stop an opponent's offensive magic, you had to suppress it with a defensive spell, and so they were an integral part of

every magician's repertoire. While some had debated the efficacy of adding an elemental property to your defensive magic – making it doubly effective against a magic of the opposite property – that would require adapting your spell to the one being used, something that took time. A moment's carelessness would spell your end.

Having reached a consensus on the matter, it was the opinion of the community at large that a property-less defensive magic was the superior choice.

However—

"That's impossible! Like something as insane as that could possibly happen! Magic is created by using a property as a medium! Something like a magic without a property can't possibly exist..."

"Huh...? What? Property... as a medium?"

What the heck? Suimei couldn't understand what they were saying at all. You can't activate magic without using a property as a medium? What the hell is that supposed to mean? A property is just a way of categorizing magic, not an essential component in using magic. It's not needed.

Although it wasn't necessary per se, but, perhaps—

"...Suimei-kun. The magic of this world requires the power of the elements in order to manifest. It's impossible to use magic otherwise. Or at least, that's how it's supposed to be. How is it that you're able to use magic that defies common sense?"

Lefille's added commentary was the missing piece of the puzzle Suimei needed to understand.

In other words...

“—Aaaaaaaah. Ha, so that’s how it is. Now I get it... The magic of this world doesn’t bestow an elemental property upon a constructed magic but rather requires using a property as a catalyst for creating magic. ”

With this, the question that had continually been on Suimei’s mind ever since his arrival was finally answered. Why did the mages of this world always imbue their spells with a property? This question had finally been resolved.

From the beginning, Suimei had always incorrectly assumed that the mages of this world were practitioners of nature magic.

Nature magic, incidentally, was magic that borrowed the forces of nature. More specifically, it was magic that reproduced phenomena found in nature – more than that need not be said.

From what he’d seen, the magic of this world belonged to this category. And so the misunderstanding had been born. But finally the riddle had been answered – the magic of this world bore but a superficial resemblance to nature magic.

Taking the hero summoning magic as an example: were the door to have been opened with nature magic, then it would simply require using magic to invoke and then control the attraction force found in nature.

In order to call upon the power of the wind, pouring your mana into the air, with its infinitesimal mass, was horribly inefficient.

Or rather, that would be the case if you were using nature magic.

Simply put, because they did not do this, the magic of this world was not

that which called forth the powers which existed naturally. If you didn't use the "elements" of which they spoke, more specifically, if you didn't directly borrow the power of one of the eight elements, then magic could not be activated. For this reason, the magic of this world always bore the distinctive mark of one of the elements.

Using the eight elements as a medium for magic could be considered rather convenient, and so it wasn't like the magic of this world was completely ineffective. That said, in pretty much every other way it was a problematic way of doing things.

...Was this due to something inherent to magic itself or was this merely a byproduct of the culture of this world? The answer to his former question had given birth to a new one.

"Having to rely on the power of a property – sorry, element, magic here sure is a pain in the ass. Integrating that into the magic construction process just adds unnecessary steps, not to mention the fact that it makes things way more complicated for no reason whatsoever. How amazingly stupid."

"What kind of crap are you spouting..."

"It's nothing, it's nothing. Defensive magic doesn't require you to imbue it with a property; that's simply inefficient."

It looked like the magic of this world didn't follow the procedure for construction used in his own. Instead, the stages of mana injection and spell construction had an extra step added after the latter – channeling an element. It was likely for this reason that incantations here were so drawn out, and subsequently, that others were so surprised when he used

magic without one.

Even if this way of doing things was harder, it wasn't something that could be helped. This was the fault of the originator of magic in this world.

It went without saying, however, that as a modern magician, what he sought was efficiency. That said, how was it that Suimei had had such a fundamental misunderstanding of the magic of this world?

...Including the fight with Felmenia, Suimei had yet to investigate this world's magic. More correctly, he hadn't had an opportunity. Although, naturally, the palace library had included books on magic, Suimei had not read a one.

Why? Well, that was because back in Suimei's world, a grimoire was essentially a book of secrets. These were not books for beginning magicians starting at square one, but rather manuals intended for those already capable of wielding magic. There were many different varieties of grimoires, including those that were themselves magic.

Accordingly, trying to learn magic from a grimoire was impossible. The basics of magic were never written down, and instead had to be passed down from one's master. Without this foundational knowledge, the contents of a grimoire would be all but unreadable. Moreover, depending on the book in question, there were even dangerous grimoires capable of eroding readers' minds or which were enchanted with magics of an indeterminate but deadly nature.

If Suimei had paid closer attention, perhaps he would have noticed that the common sense of his world did not apply here. If he had known that

grimoires here were anything but dangerous, he would have long since studied a copy. However, since Reiji and Mizuki had studied under Felmenia directly, he'd instead incorrectly assumed that the grimoires of this world were identical in nature to those back home.

For that reason, Suimei had never attempted to understand the inner workings of the magic of this world. He'd mistakenly thought that understanding their world's magic would require a substantial investment of both time and energy, and that without a foundational understanding of this world's origin, nature magic, and the traditions via which magic was passed down, he'd never make any headway.

Instead, he'd devoted his time to acquiring general knowledge about this world as well as analyzing the hero summoning circle, and had foregone the opportunity to learn more about the magic system of the world he was now in.

Finally, it had to be said that, in his heart of hearts, he also looked forward to fighting mages without knowing beforehand what their magic was like.

He, who earnestly desired to personally discover the keys to mysteries he had yet to understand, looked forward to the opportunity to encounter new mysteries with great excitement.

...And that very same anticipation, which he had held on to ever since arriving in this world, had turned out with this kind of result: there wasn't a single redeeming quality to the magic of this world.

"...Forget it. Let's just continue. I'm just as shocked as you guys are, so that makes us even, right?"

“Tch.”

“Simply put, your guys’ magic is way too undeveloped, whereas mine is quite modern. That’s pretty much all there is to it.”

“Un— Undeveloped? What are you saying...?”

“Well, yeah. It’s super primitive. Compared to the level of mysteries we deal with back where I come from, I can only say that it’s so backward that I want to cry.”

Enmarph was infuriated by Suimei’s sigh of regret.

“Hmph. Like not needing to use the elements is anything to be proud of! That kind of thing, I’ll crush it with power and numbers!”

“Well, I can’t deny that that approach works, but... Do you really have the strength to do what you say?”

The words of an incantation met Suimei’s taunt.

“—O wind! Focus thy eternal power into a formation of battle, a vicious formation! Let its strength leave all in ruins. Annihilate our enemies with its just power! Noise Tyrant!”

The incantation’s activating keyword was “noise tyrant.” In an instant, a whirlwind began to swirl around Enmarph, with similar vortexes appearing in his vicinity. This was very different from the isolated attack he’d used earlier, a formation formed of barrages using the air itself, boasting the power to tear down Suimei’s boast with force.

However—

“Secundum Perfectus! (Second bulwark, strengthen!)”

The tyrannical tempest winds howled as they attacked in succession. Each

individual strike far surpassed Suimei's compressed air explosions in destructive might, not to mention there were more than ten or twenty in number.

Time and again the storm slammed into Suimei's newly strengthened, even more brilliant barrier.

—Consecutive shots (Rush).

As the name suggested, within a moment's time, attacks poured down like rain.

The winds struck his bulwark magic, resisting for a moment before disappearing. This scene repeated itself over and over, though Suimei remained completely unharmed, his defensive magic as unyielding as a mountain.

Finally, the tempest magic gradually came to an end. It had likely been an area-of-effect magic, as smaller whirlwinds continued to dance nearby.

Formerly at the center of the storm, Suimei's bored gaze fixed upon the speechless Enmarph.

He continued to grip his staff, but could only stare dumbly in disbelief, as if there was nothing left for him to try.

Suddenly, Raikas leapt at Suimei, standing with his back to him, with full strength.

"Don't get too...!"

Gripping his two-hander, he flew at Suimei like a bullet. He'd perfectly timed his ambush for the precise moment when Enmarph's magic had ended, but from Suimei's point of view, his attack could only be seen as

slow.

Suimei flipped around, his arm hanging loose. Following Raikas' movement with his eyes, he activated his first bulwark.

"Primum Excipio!"

"Full of yourself!"

Sword and fortress wall collided, causing the high-pitched, metallic screech of metal scraping against metal. Looking more closely at the point of impact, there was the material blade that had come swinging in, and the immaterial fortress wall many grades its better. Neither gave way to the other, and sparks flew in all directions as they crashed into one another.

Nevertheless, Raikas' attack proved every bit as futile as attacking a real fortress wall with a sword would. The fierce collision hadn't affected the magic wall in the least, but the same could not be said for Raikas' sword, from which shavings had fallen.

"It's impossible for an attack of that level to touch me."

"S-shit..."

—Suimei merely stood in place, calmly awaiting the next attack while he watched his opponent's full force attack with contempt, as if he were watching a comedy sketch unfold. Catching sight of Raikas' dejected expression, he determined that it was a perfect opportunity to attack. Seizing upon the moment when Raikas' abandoned his ineffective attack, he suddenly stepped to the left.

As Suimei casually strode forward, Raikas swept his blade across.

Suimei calmly adjusted his direction, watching Raikas' attack out of the corner of his eye as he activated another defensive magic.

"Quartum Excipio! (Fourth bulwark, local activation.)"

Blocking Raikas' desperate attempt to reverse the situation was the fourth fortress wall. This fourth bulwark was designed to reflect any and all external attacks.

This fourth defensive wall's terrifying reflective power sent Raikas flying toward Enmarph.

"Uwa—"

"What—?!"

A flying figure, the sound of collision and surprise. Suimei wasn't the least bit moved. This magic, easily capable of fully reflecting physical force, had of course effected this result.

Before his opponents could rise to their feet, he began an accelerated attack.

"Nutus Multitudo Decresco... (Decrease mass, reduce gravity.)"

In a flash, the acceleration generated by each step had increased several tenfold. Under the effects of this latest magic, Suimei approached with the speed of a gale-force wind, but Raikas managed to react in time. Shifting his sword to his left hand, he prepared to meet Suimei's attack with his right fist.

Not a bad response. Looks like he's got some ability after all.

His opponent wasn't the only one who could react to the circumstances, though. Gripping his quicksilver sword in his right hand, he stuck out his

left hand as a shield.

“Like hell that’s gonna do it!” Raikas thundered angrily.

Faced with the heavy weight of Raikas incoming fist, Suimei had opted to use his hand to defend himself. Raikas’ angry roar had likely been in response to this action, thinking it impossible that such a slender hand could possibly block his attack. And indeed, if it were merely a matter of wrist strength, then Suimei had not the slightest hope of defending against this attack.

—Were it merely a matter of wrist strength, that is.

Just as right fist and left hand were to meet, Suimei’s gloved hand – originally inevitably set to meet the incoming attack – instead suddenly brushed past the attacking fist.

—Divergent Gloves. These were a magic tool that created a “divergence” with physical objects they came into contact with. As the two sides touched, they created a gap through which he was able to dodge.

Afterward, Suimei stabbed his sword into the floor, simultaneously grabbing hold of Raikas’ collar like a judoka. Combining the force generated by his opponent’s strike with the momentum generated by his forward velocity, he threw Raikas.

Without so much as glancing at Raikas, he changed direction, heading straight for Enmarph, who had just gotten up. Taking advantage of the momentary lull in action, he raised his staff, and desperately chanted an attack magic.

“Is that really okay? Your magic won’t have any power like this, you know?”

Suimei's words pressured his opponent heavily. That Enmarph's magic was incapable of harming Suimei was something they had already seen. The latter's defensive magic had completely stifled his entire offensive. Suimei's words hitting the bullseye, Enmarph's expression twisted bitterly.

"Hmph, even so—!"

Even so, he wants to continue anyway, huh? As if declaring that he wanted to end this with magic, his determination burning like a raging flame, Enmarph began to chant once more.

"Buddhi brahma. Buddhi vidya. (Awaken, power, alongside great knowledge.)"

"—O wind. Focus thy eternal power and rage!"

The two spoke their respective incantations as one. All else being the same, victory would be decided by the speed of the incantation. However, Suimei was a practitioner of the Hebrew Kabbalah which employed the Notarikon. His opponent, on the other hand, was a practitioner of a magic system which required the additional step of channeling an element in order to activate magic. For him to try and compete on speed was the height of stupidity. The moment he'd made that decision, this battle had been decided.

—All that assumed, of course, that both spells were of the same level.

"Gale!"

The first to finish their incantation was not Suimei, but Enmarph. His unexpected speed was the result of a shortened incantation not even lasting two or three phrases. As a result, however, its offensive capabilities had been weakened considerably. An attack of this level was

simply incapable of harming him.

So why had he used this magic?

The answer was soon apparent.

That was because the summoned gale came from behind his back.

Not too shabby.

As a chill ran down his spine, his mouth curved upward as joy mixed with a smile. This was what he had been pinning his hopes on, not magic battle itself, but what magic could push you to do. Suimei couldn't help but want to applaud Enmarph, who had thrown his all into such a thing.

That's why Suimei had chosen this magic. Its incantation: Buddhi, brahma. Buddhi, vidya. Buddhi, karanda—

“Buddhi karanda trishna! (And thus, abandon yourself to temptation's sweet voice!)”

—trishna. A term roughly equating to “thirst.” This was a word from Sanskrit, a central language for more than five religions' rituals, and thus a fairly powerful one from the perspective of magic. Suimei had just used this in his magic.

Next, as if a direct manifestation of this word's meaning, a draining magic circle appeared beneath Enmarph's feet.

“It's not over yet!”

As if mirroring his fighting spirit, a flood of mana burst forth from Enmarph's body.

His goal: to suppress Suimei's magic with raw power. This could be described as a magician's last resort. When faced with a magic of an

unknown nature, this wasn't a bad choice for a countermeasure.

Unfortunately, the magic Suimei had chosen had a draining effect –

Kalavinka's Sweet Voice. Draining an opponent's mana was precisely this spell's purpose, in other words—

“Wha— aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

With a blood-curdling scream, the rate at which Enmarph's magic surged from his body raged out of control. Within moments, he sank to his knees, drained dry.

“Uoooooooooooooh!”

Raikas roared from behind. Although he'd been thrown, the fact that he was able to close in this far was undoubtedly thanks to Enmarph's assistance.

Not that it mattered to Suimei, who was unruffled. Gracefully, he stretched his arm out and took up the sword he'd thrust into the ground, and fluidly spun around.

The speed of Suimei's slash surpassed that of the flash of light reflecting off Raikas' sword as he attacked. In an instant, he'd closed the gap.

“Ugh...”

Just as his swing was about to take his sword straight to Raikas' throat, he stopped his motion.

“—And it's a victory for me. Agreed?”

Neither of his opponents had any room to disagree.

CHAPTER 16

ENTICING ULTRAMARINE

Calmly, Suimei removed his quicksilver sword from Raikas' throat. Raikas dropped to the floor, gasping for breath.

"Haaa... ha... shit..."

"Ugh..."

Behind him Enmarph fell to the ground, completely exhausted, a consequence of his mana having been drained.

Victory. Their contempt and ridicule had been returned in full – complete and total victory. Generally, upon their victory, adventurers would revel in the joy of triumph, but today's victor did no such thing. Calmly, he canceled the magic enchanting his mercury blade, allowing it to return to its liquid state.

Next, as if time were rewinding itself, the flowing mercury returned itself to the vial from whence it had come.

Dorothea, the guild's representative witness for the battle watched the two fallen adventurers in amazement.

"Uwa... He really beat them both at once..."

Her face was frozen in shock, so unexpected was the outcome. Her fellow spectator, Lefille, unsurprisingly bore a warrior's gaze. She watched Suimei with a fixed gaze, her unmoving eyes seemingly scrutinizing a skilled warrior who she couldn't be careless around.

Suddenly, that serious expression vanished, replaced by a gentle smile.

"...Magnificent."

This word of praise weakened the serious aura that continued to emanate from her person.

Dorothea approached Suimei.

"Suimei-san. What an amazing battle that was! You fought against Raikas-san and Enmarph-san at the same time and completely overwhelmed them. There aren't any other Mehter guild members right now that could replicate such a feat!"

"Thank you very much. But really, I just managed to use a few of the techniques that I'm pretty good with."

His modest tone, which implied that this outcome had been a stroke of luck, provoked a look of envy from Dorothea, as well as a retort.

"What're you being modest for? You're an amazing mage! Even when compared to the mages of the mages' guild, something of this level puts you on par with the very most skilled mages! Isn't that right, Lefille-san?"

"Yeah. I'm not that familiar with what the strongest mages of Mehter's mages' guild are like, but from what we just witnessed, your skills are definitely at a high level."

Lefille's words piqued Suimei's interest.

"...On that note, if you two were to compare me to other strong mages you know, how do I match up?"

Suimei expressed his interest in the mages of this world. He'd just boasted that the magic of this world was decidedly inferior, although if speaking solely about how magic was wielded, that wasn't necessarily the case. Truth be told, he didn't have a clue just how strong the very most powerful mages of this world were.

If the conditions included a magic that was practiced and familiar and a large mana capacity, then pouring in tremendous amounts of mana into said magic would effect awesome results, resulting in a magic of such scale that it would shock anyone. Additionally, when the fact that elements were utilized as a magic catalyst into the equation, then the power would likely be even greater.

That, of course, was providing that this magic was used in battle—

His question seemed to make Dorothea happy.

“So you care about this kind of thing too, huh, Suimei-san? I guess you are a guy, after all.”

“Yeah, I guess. ...So?”

“Ahem. That’s a good attitude to have, I think. Anyway, if I were to compare you to Twilight Pavilion’s S-ranked mages, then I have to say you’re still a bit weaker...”

Her hesitation at the tail end of that sentence seemed to suggest that he was on something of a level comparable to those S-ranked mages.

That being the case...

“I see. ...By the way, the renowned White Flame of this city – how does she stack up against S-ranked mages?”

“White Flame-san is more well known for her research ability. Although she’s allegedly either first or second when it comes to raw power, but when it comes to battle, she’s still a level lower than the battle experts here.”

“Oh...”

Dorothea's declaration had been proud, as if boasting about the strength of the guild. Suimei voiced his interest.

Felmenia Stingray. Although she was a talented mage, her battle ability left something to be desired. Although her raw talent put her on par with the very best of mages, but her lack of battle experience put her a level below them. Fascinating.

That was good news. It looked like it was still a bit early to be disappointed by this world's magic.

"And you, Gurakis-san? What do you think?"

Surprisingly, Lefille looked back at him with confusion.

"...I would never have guessed you would care so much about comparing against others."

"Oh, no, it's nothing like that. This is just for reference. I want to know where I stand, your honest opinions about my ability, etc. That's the sort of thing anyone would care about, right?"

Lefille closed her eyes, as if searching her memory, before slowly answering.

"That's true... This is just my opinion, but... from what I saw today, I don't think your mana capacity is comparable to the strongest mages. When it comes to destructive power, although I saw you use magic just now, I'm afraid I can't pass judgment."

"Destructive power, huh."

As expected, the mages of this world – just like nature magic practitioners back home – focused primarily on destructive power. That

being the case, just how deadly were the strongest mages here?

"If we're talking about those who stand at the absolute peak of magedom, then a forest or a city can be leveled with a single spell. I apologize if this is a bit harsh, but you aren't even close to that level."

"I see, I see..."

That was within expectation. Since he hadn't activated his mana furnace, it was natural that there was a huge gap between them. Able to destroy a forest or a city in one blow? While it wasn't at the level of flattening mountains or destroying entire peninsulas, it was still a pretty terrifying level. Then again, even magicians back home probably weren't capable of a feat like that either. Not that that mattered right now.

"Thanks a lot. I've learned a lot."

"It's nothing. Thanking me for something that small makes me a little embarrassed."

"Not at all. There's still a lot I don't know; broadening my horizons is necessary."

Suimei bowed his head in gratitude. Dorothea tilted her head, looking confused.

"...Honestly, just who are you really, Suimei-san? You're this strong and yet I've never heard your name before..."

"Of course not. If I were to be known just for having reached this kind of level, that'd be the weird thing, right?" Suimei mocked himself.

Dorothea looked displeased.

"Please don't look down on Twilight Pavilion's intel gathering abilities.

Knowing the name of someone of your ability is pretty much guaranteed... well, almost anyway."

Her certainty wavered by the end of her sentence, admitting that there were holes in their knowledge. Suimei was a native of Japan, to expect someone from another world to have gathered intel on him was asking a bit much.

Trying to raise her spirits, Suimei answered weakly.

"Uh... How do I put this? Well, I come from somewhere pretty far away..."

"Somewhere far? The South?"

"No. East would be a more accurate description."

Suimei thought back on the maps he'd studied in the palace. Preparing for just this kind of occasion, he'd made sure to familiarize himself with geography.

To the east of Aster lay an enormous, desolate area that was a mix of forests, mountains, and desert. There hadn't been any contact with kingdoms in the area, and almost no information on that area of the world at all.

Thus, when asked, it would be fine to answer in this way.

"Oh, okay. Our knowledge of the east is definitely lacking. Does that mean that your magic is something practiced in the east?"

"You could say that," he answered, with a face that couldn't be read.

Her interest having been raised, Lefille sunk into silence before mumbling.

"Unique magic, is it..."

"Something the matter?"

"...Never mind."

"...?"

What had caught her interest?

The look in her eyes just now had been strange—

"Yeah, your magic just now was pretty amazing, whether it be the speed of activation or the strength of your defensive spells. The world sure is wide."

"You flatter me."

Being directly complimented in this manner made him rather embarrassed.

Dorothea turned to face Lefille, as if she'd suddenly remembered something.

"That reminds me, Lefille-san you're planning on leaving for the Nelferian Empire, right?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes, I am," Lefille affirmed.

So she's heading for Nelferia too? What a coincidence.

"Oh? Gurakis-san, you're planning on going to the Empire?"

"Yep. As preparations for visiting the Empire's Academy of Magic one day, I joined the guild."

"The Academy of Magic is it... That's definitely..."

The Academy of Magic. From what he'd read, it was a massive academic institution within the Empire concerned with all things magical. It

gathered students from all three kingdoms for the purposes of magic research and development, serving to further strengthen the ties between the allied nations.

The mere mention of its name should draw tremendous interest, but...

Not interested...

Whether it was research organizations or academic ones, Suimei wasn't interested. Although at first glance, Suimei, as a magic researcher, should be greatly drawn to such a thing, back in his own world, he had previously entered such an institution at his organization's command. At this "academy," he'd experienced no small degree of suffering before managing to fight his way out with the help of his comrades. From that point forward, he had nothing but negative feelings toward such things.

"Yeah. I'm pretty ignorant when it comes to magic, so I'd like to go there to learn."

"You want to learn magic?"

"Yes, I plan to study it quite thoroughly from now on."

Lefille seemed to be the type that was quite confident in her abilities.

Whatever the case, perhaps they would meet again at some point down the road. Not only were they both headed for the Empire, but they were even destined for the same district.

Dorothea suddenly sighed.

"A swordswoman of your talent would undoubtedly be able to make a name for herself here. Such a shame that you'll be leaving us. —At least Suimei-san's still here, though!"

"About that. Sorry, but after my preparations are finished, I'm leaving for the city of Krand."

After a moment's silence, Dorothea screamed at Suimei.

"...Huuuuuuuuuuuuuh?! I finally thought that we'd suddenly had a promising new magician in you, and yet this?! Weren't you going to give the mage's guild a huge shock?!"

What kind of rampant delusions had passed through her mind?

"...Sorry."

"How did this happen...? And we finally had such promising recruits for once..."

"Really sorry about that. I have things that I need to do, though."

"...I see. Well, if the two of you have something in mind, then that's that."

"Yeah, plus my final destination's also the Empire."

"You too?"

"Yep. When it comes to intel, the Empire's the best place for that sort of thing."

"Is that so? Well, I don't know when we'll meet again, but please take care of me when that time comes."

"Right, same here."

"—With that, I should probably take my leave. Suimei-kun, I learned a lot from your battle just now."

With that farewell, she turned gracefully.

Suimei, something on his mind, watched her tensely.

“...”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing. Take care.”

Thanking him for his well wishing, she exited through the training field doors.

Suimei’s eyes narrowed as he watched that beautiful figure disappear.

—If it’s her, then this should be fine. She’s not the kind that enjoys idle chatter, and she doesn’t have any companions. Plus, she’s the cautious type.

Anyway, she was bound for the Empire anyway. It wasn’t likely that what happened here would be leaked.

...Confirming her exit, Suimei raised a question without ever taking his eyes off the doors.

“—So can you tell me what my ranking is?”

Unable to see Suimei’s expression as he posed this question, Dorothea looked up at the ceiling as she answered.

“That, hmm... Right, well, Suimei-san, you defeated both Raikas-san and Enmarph-san.”

“...Yeah.”

“...”

At this, Raikas, his face ashen, looked away. Enmarph’s face was similarly remorseful. As expected, two defeats in a row was hard to stomach.

Watching the pair out of the corner of her eyes, Dorothea answered in a business-like tone.

“Although typically speaking a C-rank would be most appropriate, but considering that you’ve clearly demonstrated a B-rank ability, then it only makes sense to register you as a B-rank.”

“Oh...” Suimei said in surprise, this evaluation beyond his expectation.

B-rank. Although he was undoubtedly a person of some ability, he’d still been evaluated quite highly.

Her decision made, Dorothea revealed a happy expression, saying something that seemed to make her happy.

“That was truly very impressive. You’ve become someone famous in one go, Suimei-san.”

“Perhaps.”

“Yep, yep. I can guarantee it.”

As she spoke, she revealed a confident look that seemed to say, “Leave it all to me.”

Indeed. If a new adventurer were to suddenly appear with such a high evaluation, then his name would definitely spread quickly.

“It’s just that—”

“...?”

That was, of course, providing that certain things happened first.

“—That would only happen if the three of you – Dorothea, you included – were to reveal what happened today, right?”

“...? Well, even if we didn’t talk about what happened here, a brand-new B-rank would draw attention all its own.”

—Exactly. That was the key.

As Dorothea stood there, puzzling over his words, before any of them realized what had happened, Suimei adorned himself in his black-colored work clothing.

Suddenly, a terrifying aura burst out from his body.

Raikas, the first to notice something was awry, stared at Suimei.

“...You.”

“It’s not a problem. I won’t become anyone famous. No, during today’s test, I was handily defeated, and was appropriately given a D-rank. This is what you will report. I will be remembered as a second-rate magician without a single redeeming quality besides his ability to work restorative magic.”

“—?”

His words left Dorothea completely uncomprehending, while Raikas and Enmarph were frozen by the tense atmosphere. What had just happened? Along with the frightening pressure being exerted by Suimei, he’d pronounced a declaration for them to follow.

And so—

“I apologize to the three of you, but I’ll have you honor my request.”

“Even if you say that, well...”

“Ah—”

Turning, he suddenly placed his hands atop their heads, and immediately enacted a magic without the least hesitation.

Raikas, charging at him to interrupt his actions, and Dorothea, innocently

standing there clueless, were thus subjected to Suimei's command magic without resistance.

Because neither of the pair had any notable magic resistance, the result was obvious

His magic scoured the expressions from their faces, and their shoulders drooped, their stares blank as they stood lifelessly in place.

There was but one who did not fall under the spell of his magic.

Trembling fiercely, Enmarph cried out in fear.

"...Why?"

"Hmm? Do you even have to ask? It's like I just said. I just want to be ranked appropriately is all."

"The hell are you saying? Rankings are a matter of the utmost importance to guild members. Throwing away the high rank you've attained like that... what is your goal?"

Suimei answered his question without worry.

"It's not like I have anything particular in mind, you know?"

"What—?"

"Doing things like this will let me avoid quite the hassle is all."

"Now that you say that..."

Enmarph expressed understanding. A high rank would lead to no small trouble, something he well understood as a senior of the guild. Moreover, just as he was currently witnessing, this was even worse for someone who had no intention of letting himself draw attention.

"What I need is to accumulate a lot more experience battling the people

of this world.”

“ ‘The people of this world...?’ ”

“That’s nothing you need concern yourself with.”

It didn’t matter who, there wasn’t a single native of this world who would simply let his words just now pass unanswered. Suimei didn’t bother to answer, though. It wasn’t anything a stranger need concern himself with. Enmarph was again filled with anxiety.

“Even if you erase our memories of what happened here, it’s useless. What you did outside won’t disappear. Dorothea told us what you did.”

“Yeah, but it’s not like anyone’s going to investigate too thoroughly, right? This test will be the standard for assessing my strength, and the stuff that happened outside happens every now and again, right? Humans are the kind of creature that delights in looking down on others, and in the absence of undeniable evidence, would prefer to believe others weaker than themselves, rather than stronger.”

“ ... ”

Enmarph did not speak. More correctly, he couldn’t speak. As if the words had been stolen straight out of his mouth.

All he did was stare fretfully at the monster before him.

The words just now had perfectly mirrored his own sentiments, evoking the shocked stare he displayed now.

“On that note, don’t you think everyone would have a much easier time accepting things if they felt that I was just a bumbling braggart of a mage? Especially for those confident in their own ability.”

“...Why would you intentionally hurt your own ability to accept commissions? Even if commissions from the Twilight Pavilion are many, but the ones appropriate to you—”

“It’s not like they necessarily exist. Definitely. Anyway, I have already provided for such a circumstance. There are countless jobs in need of a mage capable of working restorative magic. The ability to heal wounds is an ability where demand outstrips supply no matter where you are, particularly if the restorative magics you’re capable of are especially rare.”

As Suimei spoke, he advanced.

In Enmarph’s eyes, it was as though the Devil himself were approaching.

“Hmph. I’m a mage, how could I possibly be done in so easily— Ugh?!”

As he shifted into a combat ready stance, he suddenly noticed. In his current state, he was helpless to offer any resistance whatsoever. The reason?

“And the trap snaps shut. Your magic’s all gone, right? Kalavinka’s Sweet Voice is just this kind of magic.”

“Ah—”

...All magicians possessed the ability to resist magic. Using one’s own mana, a mage was able to repel the effects of magic. As a magician, coming under the effect of another’s magic was to be expected, and carefully studying methods for opposing their magic was a necessity.

However, one’s defensive capabilities were naturally inextricably tied with the condition of one’s body and mind.

What did this imply for Enmarph, drained dry as he was?

“It’s just a forceful suggestion, really. Don’t worry, there aren’t any side effects. You’ll just go to sleep, and when you awake, it’ll all be as I just declared. I have no plans on hurting any of you.”

...Suimei was a magician. As such, were he to battle the mages of this world, it would inevitably become a contest of magic. However, as someone who both wished to disguise himself as someone normal, all the while obtaining an accurate measure of his strength, he’d found himself in something of a conundrum.

However, were he to avoid magic battles, and restrict himself to fighting warriors only, then he’d lose the opportunity to learn about their world’s magic.

For this purpose, once the battle was over, he needed a way to keep their mouths shut. Instead, draining the mana that provided a mage an opportunity to resist provided the perfect opportunity.

And so.

“So that’s how it is... Wait, then earlier, you—”

Indeed.

“Exactly. That’s why I needed to fight the two of you at the same time.”

—With a chilling gaze of absolute zero, Suimei’s hand covered Enmarph’s head.

☆

...Sunset. At this time, the crimson red of the sun melted into the dark blue of the dusky night.

His test finished, Suimei made his way back from the Twilight Pavilion to

his room in the inn, before plopping down heavily on his bed.

Although there had been some unexpected twists prior to his test, everything from that point forward had proceeded just as planned, whether it be finding somewhere to stay, or the successful obtaining of his guild identification, and so he'd found his way back here.

Being able to resolve everything without problem was lucky indeed.

The only thing that had been beyond his expectations was finding out that he and Lefille were lodged in the same inn.

"A fortuitous meeting indeed..." Suimei muttered, as he remembered the circumstances of their meeting earlier.

Lefille Gurakis. A swordswoman with long, red hair. The figure she created when standing couldn't be described as anything but gorgeous. He wasn't sure how strong she was, but considering how unruffled she'd been after witnessing his battle, strong was definitely the word.

Moreover, although she was definitely capable of taking care of herself, there was something about her that made him worry. After the battle, when she'd been staring at him, he'd noticed.

Her originally clear, sharp gaze had momentarily clouded over. That was something unique to those who had been caught helplessly by ill fate, as if immersed in gloom.

Can't be, right...?

Suimei shook his head fiercely to clear his thoughts. There wasn't any point in losing himself in those kinds of thoughts here. No matter who, everyone had aspects to them that'd make you worry. That's all it was.

Truth be told, in the eyes of others, he probably looked like that himself. Anyway, worrying about her like this was fruitless. After their farewell earlier, it was quite possible that they'd never meet again in this life. It had been sheer happenstance that they'd even met this once, after all.

...Suimei gazed out his window. It was currently that period of time when evening was indistinguishable from night. Speaking of which, "nightfall" – just who had come up with that word? The fading light of the setting sun cast a long shadow over the surroundings, throwing them into obscurity, filling him with an indescribable feeling.

"Haaah..."

Suimei yawned under the effects of the lethargy which had suddenly crept up on him.

What was going on? It wasn't yet the time when he normally slept, and yet the Sandman had clearly begun to exert its influence over his body. He hadn't done anything particularly tiring, and yet found himself unable to fend off this wave of sleepiness.

Why?

Oh... That's why. Shit... This is...

—He'd thought of the reason. He knew this feeling. He knew why this overpowering sleepiness had crept upon him now that he was all alone. Indeed. This was a phenomenon that would inevitably occur once he'd separated from "that type of person."

So that's why... of course...

This was a play of scenes from the future, something he was forced to

watch due to Ludwig's curse. It announced the crises that awaited him, only for memories of what he'd seen to vanish once he awoke. These visions would last only for the immediate moment, a clairvoyance without the least value.

So this thing happens even here, huh? Even somewhere like this, this would still happen? Even in a world like this, straight out of the pages of a fantasy book, a world without the least connection to the world he called home.

He'd been fairly certain that it wouldn't happen here. If he were to successfully find a way home, this had been the one thing he hadn't looked forward to returning to.

Not wanting to let go of his thoughts, as he thought things through, his body unconsciously tightened, and collapsed atop his bed. There was no way to fight the sleepiness that came upon him.

At some point during this process, the image of his mother, who he'd never before seen, appeared on the chair in his room. This woman, who he'd only ever heard about from his father, appeared now before his eyes under the effects of the curse.

♪ Ahhhh ♪

She was singing. Rather than a lullaby to lull a child to sleep, it was more a sorrowful aria lamenting the suffering her child was to experience. This very same song drew him into a world of dreams that were not dreams. Sleep~

—His mother, at the mercy of Ludwig's curse, held in one hand the book which recorded her future from which she recited, gently, dolefully.

—Enticing, ultramarine Al Kern. (TN: No idea what that term is supposed to be: アル・ケルン)

This was undoubtedly every bit the curse it was called. Having to chant the verses of a poem which told of a past and future from which she could not be saved. This illusion of his mother, who had succumbed to this curse, appeared each time.

It was for this reason that he raced to the side of all those who found themselves trapped helplessly by fate. His days of battle were about to begin once more it seemed.

Forcing open his leaden eyelids, Suimei looked upon the words of the book held by his departed mother.

“—Silence! I’m not going to run any more. I will live on as I should!”

The survivor of a broken country. The young, half-spirit swordswoman, forced to bear the shameful curse laid upon her by the Varied Races: Lefille Gurakis Nosya.

“Shut it! For someone like me, only needed for my ability in battle, this is fine!”

Hatred her eternal companion, the Empire’s human weapon who had immersed herself in the abyss of dark magics: Liliana Zandark.

“—We meet again, Suimei. I’d thought for sure that we’d never see each other again. That’s why, let’s never part again.”

At the mercy of fate and Nureha of Kadath, his friend who had come to be known as the Sword Princess: Kuchiba Hatsumi.

“—Enough with the pretty words! No matter how many times you say

such things, happiness will never come!”

The dark green figure, cursed by Ludwig, whom he’d sworn an oath to save: Isrina Coulanges.

“Suimei. Humans and the Mazoku are the same. If both sides are as filthy as this, then I—”

He who had been summoned alongside Suimei, the hero who had turned his back on humanity out of despair. Holy sword in hand, the swordsman of the hidden god: Shana Reiji.

“—It’s been a long time, brat. How’s it been? You any stronger now?”

The world’s strongest swordsman, called to this other world by a forbidden, unplanned summoning: Beowulf Schneider.

“—So this is my enemy?”

The ferocious demon lord who controlled all curses, the empress of the Varied Races: Nakshatra.

...Sleep, Suimei. If you don’t rest when you can, then there will come a day when you will fall. Because that is the fate that inescapably awaits you.

With those words that he should not have been able to hear, Suimei’s consciousness faded into darkness.

CHAPTER 17

UNPLEASANT MEMORY

—The girl had once had a dream.

A very normal, very ordinary dream: to protect the place where she'd been born as well as the people who had raised her.

For people born to this world, particularly those who were living proper lives, this was more or less a desire they all held in common.

This girl lived as those nameless masses did, with that dream guiding her.

There was, however, a distinct difference between that girl and the others who shared her dream. She was, in fact, anything but a normal human. Instead, she was born the scion of an ancient line of spirits, apostles of the Goddess Arshuna. It was her duty to repel the invasions of the Varied Races, and so she had come to be known as the Miko. (TN: The characters here are “神子”, an alternative to the more commonly used “巫女”. These characters literally translate to “God's child”.)

As the girl tirelessly developed her swordsmanship, she'd often hear, “Spirits are the Goddess Arshuna's gift to humanity, a rare power that exists to defend against the Varied Races.”

And so defeat was not an option.

To protect the peaceful lives of the people, this was a power that could not be allowed to disappear.

And so the girl continued to live, praying constantly to the Goddess Arshuna even as she ceaselessly practiced her swordsmanship. On occasion, she'd make her way north to repel the invasions of the Varied Races, laying their raiding parties to waste. And so the days passed, the

girl continually able to realize her dream.

Even though it left her without even the possibility of realizing the happiness of being born a woman, the girl never gave up on her dream.

But dreams come to an end.

When the new Maou ascended to the throne, her dream vanished like the popping of a bubble.

By the time the news reached the capital, it was already far too late. A swarming flood of a million strong of the Varied Races swept through the north. Cities and villages disappeared in their wake, swallowed by this ferocious threat.

Overwhelming numbers. Moreover, each individual member of the Varied Races displayed a power far exceeding human ability. Their indomitable might coupled with their staggering numbers left humanity in complete and utter despair.

That notwithstanding, the girl fought to keep hope alive, infinitesimal though it might be. To protect her homeland and its people, she would continue to swing that sharp blade for as long as there was yet breath in her body.

Before her power as a Spirit and her divine swordsmanship, countless members of the Varied Races were transformed into a mountain of corpses.

The girl was strong. Stronger even than any of the North's most elite troops. That strength, however, availed them not as they were swept away by the violent, overpowering might of the enemy.

Beneath the force of crushing malice, the girl's dream shattered. The girl's

homeland was trampled by the invading force, and the lives of those whom she had fought to protect were cut tragically short.

That overwhelming power was absolute even when it came to the girl.

The girl suffered defeat at the hands of a leader of the Varied Races' army, his strength as terrible as though evil itself had been made manifest. Worse still, after her loss, she had been made the victim of a shameful and vile curse.

Perhaps this is my end, the girl thought, resigning herself to the fate her companions had met: for this, her homeland, to be her final resting place. She had fought that wretched enemy general to her very last and dealt him injuries from which he would never recover.

Sadly, even this solemn, stirring resolution of hers was to be broken – her people told her to live.

Indeed, the power the girl wielded was invaluable. It was a gift from the heavens, the Goddess of Justice made manifest, the power of the spirits bestowed by the Goddess Arshuna herself. A rare and precious power that was antithetical to the Varied Races, who worshiped at the altar of a wicked god.

She was a hope that must not disappear, a light that must not be extinguished. And so she could not be allowed to die there. No, she would have to live on in shame, growing steadily in strength until the day she could plunge the sword of retribution straight into the heart of the Mazoku.

...Once, the girl had a dream. Now, she didn't even have a choice.

And so it was that, once more, on this day, the girl – Lefille Gurakis

Noshias – wept silent tears alone.



Several days after his visit to the guild, Suimei, having woken up bright and early, was swinging his sword in practice.

“Sei! Ha!”

Repeatedly, he swung his sword in a vertical motion, from high to low, his breathing steady and undisturbed.

This was a practiced motion for him, and one from his youth, though not something that he had learned from his father. No, this was something he had learned at the dojo near where he lived.

Although his father, a magician, was also an expert at close combat, he had decided this matter was still best left to the professionals, and had taken his son to the nearby dojo.

These chained motions were a part of the swordsmanship he had learned there.

Swordsmanship was something that would inevitably deteriorate without consistent and steady effort. With the exception of a few exceptionally talented individuals, a week’s time was sufficient to degrade one’s swordsmanship.

This was doubly the case for Suimei, who had devoted his time in the palace to study.

While it’s true that Suimei could well rely on his magic or magic items to engage in close combat – swordsmanship wasn’t a necessity per se – he nevertheless felt far more at ease with a sword in hand.

“Fuuu... That should do it...”

Taking a deep breath as he finished a set, he wiped his sweat with a towel. Although today’s practice was a bit simpler compared to his normal routine, but in light of his plans for the rest of the day, it would do.

This was not a day when he could afford to be exhausted right from the get-go. Today was the day when Suimei would set out on an escort mission destined for the Nelferian Empire.

This escort mission would take him from city to city, nation to nation. His undertaking this commission was, of course, because it aligned with his goals.

His objective was to discover a way home and then to create the path that would do so.

To that end, visiting the Empire – a place that far outstripped Aster in both ease of obtaining intel and resources – was a necessity. The first stop along that path required that he first reach the city of Kurand, on Aster’s western border, near the Empire.

Kurand was a city that sat on the boundary between Aster and Nelferia. It was a highly developed city with regards to both trade and intel, second only after the capital, Mehter itself. Suimei wanted to get a grasp on the workings of the Empire before actually setting foot in the country, and so he’d planned to spend some time in Kurand gathering resources before making way to his final destination.

For this purpose, Suimei had attached himself to a business caravan which was thoroughly acquainted with the area and the journey.

...He’d been on the constant lookout for such commissions at the guild,

when finally this opportunity had presented itself the day before.

Because competition was fierce, he'd originally assumed that it would have taken quite some time to successfully accept such a commission. Instead, however, it had only been three or four days, quite a bit earlier than his projections.

When it came to this, it had to be said that his ability to use restorative magic played a large role. By the time D-ranked magician Suimei had made his way to the reception window, the caravan had already met its requirements for bodyguards. That notwithstanding however, the leader of the caravan had said that when it came to mages wielding healing magics, the more the merrier, and welcomed Suimei.

As presumed, this world was quite welcoming towards mages capable of using restorative magic.

Given that his guild record was still a blank slate with regards to accomplishments, it was possible that the caravan leader was of the opinion that if he was really of use, then it was all worthwhile.

In any event, his plans for the day were already set. Today, he would leave Mehter.

Right then. Let's head back, Suimei thought to himself, hiding his mercury blade once more on his person.

On the way back to the inn to make final checks on his preparation for the journey ahead, Suimei was walking back to his room when he crashed into someone headfirst going around a corner.

"Oh man, I'm so sorr—!"

For a brief moment, he saw stars. Shaking slightly from the impact,

Suimei apologized for his inattentiveness.

Suddenly, he stopped short. More accurately, he was left speechless by a sudden turn of events.

The person Suimei had crashed into was a fellow member of the guild as well as someone lodged in the same inn as him – Lefille Gurakis.

However, what had stunned him so was not that the person he had literally run into was someone familiar to him.

No, he had interrupted himself because this girl, Lefille Gurakis, looked terribly off.

Indeed, she'd come rushing in from somewhere – outside?! – dressed only in her underwear, her eyes red and swollen, tears running down her face.

“Ah—”

Lefille seemed to have finally realized how she must look. Even so, she simply gasped, frozen in surprise. The sorrow that weighed upon her soul was such that it seemingly left her unable to care about her appearance, coming far second to the dark cloud of gloom that rested upon her.

“Uh, um, eh—?”

The other party, Suimei, was similarly frozen stiff, unsure of how to react to the unexpected situation.

Although he'd definitely run into her with a fair amount of force, from what he could tell, this hadn't been caused by the impact. Both her state of dress and her weeping were simply too far out of the blue.

“Oh, sorry...”

At long last, Lefille seemed to have come to. She wiped her tears, offered those words in a pained voice, and completely disregarding Suimei's words, dashed directly further into the inn.

Suimei, completely dumbfounded, stood frozen in place before finally muttering to himself in confusion.

"What on earth was that...?"

It was, however, early in the morning, and with all others lost in dreamland, there were none to answer him.

CHAPTER 18

CARAVAN GUARD

Several hours after the morning incident. Suimei passed through the city wall encircling Mehter, dressed in the clothing he'd purchased earlier, the altered bag he'd brought with him from his world in one hand.

Despite having taken the time to finish final preparations at the inn, finish breakfast, and even kill some time before departure, Suimei had not had a chance to either apologize or say farewell to Lefille. Fate permitting, we'll meet again anyway, he thought to himself, before taking off at the appointed time.

Running through a few requisite exit procedures with the sentry at the city gate, he finally exited the city.

At the side of the long road leading away from the city was the meeting place for the caravan escorts.

Before reaching the rendezvous point, however, Suimei suddenly turned to look behind him, some unknown feeling prompting to him to take in the soaring city walls.

This was Suimei's first time looking at these city walls, which protected Mehter every day, from this close.

It was a massive defensive structure encircling the entire city.

Although it had been constructed not only for the purpose of protecting the palace, but the entire capital as a whole, the term "castle wall" felt nonetheless appropriate. Back in his own world, the construction of castle-like rampart walls to protect cities had similarly been a common practice back in the Middle Ages.

An integral part of the defensive function of the structure, the top of the wall was arrayed with battlements featuring both parapets for defending against enemy archers as well as crenels for defending archers to fire their own arrows through.

It looked like the people of this world relied on such fortifications to defend against external threats to the city – both human and monster alike.

However—

Just like Dorothea mentioned earlier, it doesn't look like these walls are protected against magic.

Looking at the city wall, Dorothea's words came to mind. Indeed, the wall running around Mehter seemed to be constructed of a very different type of material from the magic-resistant one that the guild training field had been built with.

Instead, it looked to have been built using a kind of gray brick, likely the same type of primitive concrete that the Ancient Greeks had used to build the many temples of their gods. This was likely because the magic-resistant material had been a recent discovery, and thus could not have been used in the construction of these walls, given their age. On that point, given the scarcity of the material in question, it likely couldn't have been used on such a large structure anyway.

"But like this, a single powerful spell is all it would take to bring this whole thing down."

Objects subjected to direct magical attack would very quickly crumble, let alone a primitive structure like this one.

Although it looked impressive enough, but considering the vital role it played in defense, he had to say it didn't seem that reliable. Increasing its size would do nothing; its fundamental flaw was its fragility.

Worrying about this is meaningless, Suimei thought as he turned back. The defensive capability of the city was no concern of his – he had defensive walls of his own, after all. Spending any more time pondering the defenses of this world was a pointless endeavor.

Pulling his thoughts back to the present, Suimei looked at the empty space before him, where people had already begun to gather.

Standing there were a number of people dressed in rather fine clothing as well as roughly twenty who were armed. In total, there were some dozens of people as well as a handful of wagons.

It had already reached the scale where it could be considered a small, mobile village – this was the caravan that Suimei was looking for.

Caravans. In his original world, similar things had existed. Merchants and transporters would join together to protect both themselves and their cargo when passing through dangerous areas, defending against robbers and other violence.

The caravan head was typically a merchant responsible for transporting goods between cities, who engaged in this business as a livelihood. Other members of the caravan included both those who traveled under this banner as well as unaffiliated merchants who joined for the journey.

I have to say, this is pretty much what I expected.

The scene before him essentially mirrored his knowledge of how such things worked back home. At least with respect to outer appearance,

there wasn't really anything that stood out as being different.

However, if one were to instead consider the armed individuals standing by the wayside, the differences between this caravan and ones back home would become immediately apparent.

A single glance would reveal armored warriors and mages alike, including even female swordswomen similar to Lefille among their number.

Although the armed individuals numbered not more than twenty, Suimei nevertheless felt that this was quite a substantial force already.

The sheer number of guards that had been hired was a testament to the dangers of this world.

Not only was the level of civilization in this world considerably low, but many dangers were also present that were not to be found in his own world. In this world, without suitable martial force, travel between cities and kingdoms would already be all but impassable; transportation methods from back home such as airplanes and rail were, of course, an impossibility.

Traveling between cities consisted of following the large, paved road. Street lights did not exist, and even finding a water source or lodgings required a good amount of effort.

As Suimei considered the circumstances, he came to realize just how convenient life had really been back in his own world.

Debating the relative conveniences and inconveniences of the two worlds with himself, Suimei finally arrived, and made his way toward a particular man who was dressed like a merchant.

From the description he'd been given at the guild when accepting the

request, this appeared to be the man who had given the commission to the Twilight Pavilion.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m Yakagi Suimei, from the adventurer’s guild. I’m here to present myself as one of the escorts for this caravan.”

The man first met Suimei’s business-like introduction with a look of suspicion, his expression changing as he suddenly remembered something.

“Oh, how polite. I’m Galeo, the one who’s organized this caravan. You’re the Yakagi who knows restorative magic, I presume? Thank you for accepting this request. If any are injured along the way to Kurand, I’ll be relying on you.”

“No problem at all. It’s a pleasure to be working with you as well.”

Suimei took the outstretched hand in a handshake, signaling the end of their business meeting.

Suddenly, however, Galeo looked at Suimei with some confusion on his face.

“I’d heard Yakagi-san was a mage, but your clothing...”

“Oh, my clothes?”

“Mm-hmm. No matter how I look at it, I can’t see it as a mage’s clothing...”

So he’s confused about this too, huh?

“Haha. I’m not actually that fond of mage’s clothing, to be quite honest with you,” Suimei answered with an unfeigned smile.

Galeo again gave him an appraising look.

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Let’s see, how do I put this... Mage clothing is so over-the-top, as if to rub how great we are in people’s faces. It’s totally putting on airs.”

This was indeed how Suimei truly felt after seeing the apparel of the mages of this world. These last few days, up until he’d managed to accept this commission, he’d often gone out for strolls on the town. He had thus seen more than a few magicians and staff members of the magician’s guild.

His impression at the time? How incredibly pompous.

Now, that wasn’t to say that all mages were thus attired, or even that clothing of this nature was inherently inappropriate. Nevertheless, for Suimei, new to this as he was, the mere thought of dressing in that manner filled him with embarrassment.

Additionally, Suimei had no particular desire to appear particularly mysterious, important, or superior.

Furthermore, the sight of their clothing brought to mind images of his own world, where he’d seen the ostentatious mage clothing of antiquity. Even if it meant creating unnecessary misunderstandings, he refused to look like that.

Finally, although his situation was indeed slightly special, the other magicians Suimei had met – his father and the Society head included – were similarly dressed in normal clothing.

“Oh, I see. ...Well, if I have to be honest with you, I don’t really like that style of clothing either. Any time I have to interact with those types, they

always give off the feeling that they're superior to me."

"Is that so? Yeah, I have to say I don't feel like that suits me."

"Yep, yep. I can totally understand that. I definitely prefer your type, who are more mild and polite in your dealings."

"Oh, that reminds me. I've already prepared things like a magic staff, so you don't need to worry about that."

100% lie.

"Oh, okay. There's nothing else on my mind then. We'll be in your care for the duration of the trip."

"Right."

Suimei's agreement marked the end of the conversation and Galeon returned to join the other merchants.

He definitely had other matters to take care of. They were about to set out, after all. It was natural that he'd be busy at this time as the one in charge of the caravan.

At that moment, a nostalgic voice called out to Suimei, instilling him with a sense of déjà vu.

"...Excuse me, but is that you, Suimei-kun?"

"Huh? Oh, Gurakis-san?"

Suimei turned to see the figure of someone who shouldn't have been there: Lefille Gurakis.

"What brings you here? I'm sure you said that you weren't planning on leaving for a short while yet?" he asked, thoroughly nonplussed.

Because Suimei and Lefille had stayed at the same inn, they'd conversed several times. Through those conversations, he'd learned that Lefille had some things to take care of, and thus hadn't planned on leaving for some time yet.

So why would she be here, looking like she's ready to set out as well? Suimei was unable to come up with an explanation.

His question prompted a nod from Lefille.

"Yeah, you're right. It's just that the reward from the commission I accepted a couple days ago was quite a bit larger than expected. That meant that I met my goal for earnings earlier than expected as well."

"So you've saved up enough?"

"Yep. I'm definitely fine on that point," Lefille answered with a calm smile.

When they'd spoken earlier, she'd told him that she needed to stay around Mehter for a while, to save up money for travel as well as expenses for study.

"...If you don't mind my asking, can I ask what kind of request that was?"

"Monster bounty. A large monster appeared a fair distance from here. The situation was pretty urgent, and so the reward was quite large."

" 'A large monster'? " Suimei inquired, his interest piqued.

He'd never guessed that something like that had happened while he'd been waiting for an escort mission.

"Yep. A semi-giant."

"Semi-giant..."

"Mm-hmm."

...She didn't continue.

She apparently was under the misconception that Suimei would understand with just that.

"...Um, and what exactly is that?"

"...Eh? You don't know, Suimei-kun? We're talking about semi-giants, you know?"

"I'm afraid not. There's nothing like that where I'm from, you see."

"O-oh, wow. Um, okay... So there are places like that too..."

His answer had been too unexpected; Lefille was completely taken aback. This was to be expected, however. As a visitor from another world, there was a veritable mountain of "common knowledge" items of which Suimei was ignorant. The name included the word "giant", so he could at least tell that this monster was large and humanoid.

"Okay. Semi-giants are a subspecies of giant. They're one-eyed, and though smaller in stature than a normal giant, are still quite massive. Their arm strength is of particular note, and is at a frightening level – they can shatter a city wall with a single arm. But still, I have to say... That a monster like this, which commonly appears in fairytales, doesn't exist in the east..."

"Well, you could say that. ...So Gurakis-san, how did you defeat it?"

Suimei's sigh carried a tinge of astonishment. A being that was capable of destroying a city wall was clearly extremely dangerous. Lefille's casual attitude when speaking of having defeated the monster, without the least

hint of pride or excitement... It looked like she was a rather incredible person.

"It wasn't like I did it on my own, you know? A number of us formed a party to take it down. My contributions were quite small, in fact."

Given the indifferent look on her face, he was unable to tell if she was simply being modest or not. Nevertheless, he had a hard time believing her words...

Anyway—

"On that note, can I ask if this monster is pretty common?"

Semi-giants. As he posed this question, he envisioned a slightly smaller version of the legendary Cyclops from the stories of his world. This time its appearance had been sudden, but how were things normally?

Suimei's head drooped gloomily as he awaited Lefille's reply. Pleaaaaase tell me something like that isn't a common occurrence.

"Not at all. Small monsters are one thing, but large monsters like the semi-giant are quite rare. Actually, speaking of that, this area isn't a suitable environment for them."

I guess they're not that common after all, Suimei thought to himself just as Lefille continued.

"That said, I can't say it was entirely coincidence. The fact of the matter is that it did appear here, after all."

"Yeah..."

...Lefille's words prompted Suimei to sink into thought. From what he'd read in the palace library with respect to monster ecology, there were two

or three main hypotheses as to why large monsters appeared.

First, a naturally occurring phenomenon resulting in spontaneous generation. Second, mutation. Finally, offspring of the Mazoku which suffered from cognitive defects at birth.

Suimei personally felt that the last hypothesis seemed the most likely. The first two options were simply too coincidental, whereas the last conjecture seemed reasonable enough. If it was indeed true, however, then that would mean—

“There’s Mazoku nearby.”

Although he didn’t know where Lefille had fought the semi-giant, this was nevertheless obvious conclusion to draw.

Lefille, however, did not reply. Perhaps she had figured he was simply mumbling to himself.

“Gurakis-san?”

“...Oh, yeah, maybe.”

She had been so slow to reply that Suimei turned to look, only to find her gazing off into the distance.

The valiant, elegant spirit that had formerly been reflected in her pupils had been replaced by a murky shadow.

He didn’t know why, but something about their conversation just now had put her in a dreary mood.

...After a brief moment, Lefille finally seemed to notice Suimei’s worried look, dispelling the dark mood in an instant.

“It’s nothing. Please don’t worry about it.”

“Hah...”

She was definitely thinking about something, Suimei thought to himself as he expressed perplexed acknowledgment. Lefille, on the other hand, cut off that thread of conversation, pretending as though nothing had happened.

“Um, about that...”

“...?”

That solemn, valiant feeling vanished alongside her hesitant words. She seemed to be embarrassed about something, her tone finally matching her age.

“Er no, it’s just that... Um, well...”

“...?”

Lefille hesitated. Closer consideration revealed that her cheeks had taken on a reddish tinge. What the heck is going on?

Turning her head slightly, Lefille peeked at Suimei out of the corner of her eye. Finally, having resolved herself, she spoke.

“U-um, sorry about this morning. I showed you a bad side of me...” she said with her head hung, embarrassed.

Shockingly, she brought up the incident from that morning herself.

Even though Lefille had just apologized, Suimei felt that he’d been rather careless himself, and so—

“Oh, no, not at all... I was too careless. Sorry about that, really. I should have been paying more attention as I took that corner.”

“No, the fault was mine. I should have been more aware of my

surroundings. Please don't worry yourself over it. It was truly my mistake."

Lefille rebuffed his words with a shake of her head and another apology.

Suimei gathered his courage, and asked her a question.

"...Um, might I ask what happened?"

"Er... sorry!"

"...Not at all. Those should be my words. Sorry for asking you something like that. Please just forget I asked."

Recognizing that Lefille was unable to answer, Suimei immediately apologized, discarding any plans to inquire further.

What had happened that morning was likely both complicated and inconvenient to share. Although he was definitely still concerned, but he knew better than to pry.

"I-I'm going to go present myself to the caravan leader," Lefille hurriedly pronounced, seemingly unable to endure the current atmosphere before walking off in Galeo's direction without waiting for a reply from Suimei.

CHAPTER 19

HEART TO HEART

Some tens of minutes after Suimei and Lefille were reunited, the caravan set off without delay.

Their journey was off to a good start. If the rest of the trip could continue without any unwanted surprises, that would be fantastic.

What was left to them now was to make their way to Kurand while keeping an eye on the caravan. When it came to how far they had to travel, Suimei had already investigated the matter thoroughly beforehand.

Traveling between Mehter and Kurand was roughly a six or seven day trip. Due to the proximity of the capital city Mehter to the western border, the time it took to travel between these cities could still be seen as relatively short. Nevertheless, for a child of the modern era such as Suimei, walking for an entire day was fairly rough going.

During this time, they'd follow the stone road through forest and plateau, mountain and basin before eventually reaching their destination.

For the trip, Suimei had been positioned at the rear end of the caravan.

Those more worthy of trust – veterans of the guild and career mercenaries – led the way while Suimei and the others were responsible for keeping watch over the cargo.

Because human lives were seen as the priority, they'd been informed that were something to occur, they were to prioritize the safety of the wagon drivers over the cargo itself. On a different note, Suimei was currently walking alongside Lefille, who had similarly undertaken the responsibility of protecting the caravan goods.

Perhaps owing to the earlier awkwardness, as the trip first began, Lefille mostly kept to herself, keeping an eye on the wagons, horses, and their surroundings, only occasionally breaking the silence.

Slowly but surely, however, because their ages were so close as well as the fact that they were colleagues engaged in the same task, conversation between them gradually grew warmer.

Accompanied by the gentle sounds of the horses' hooves against the road, the turning of the wagon wheels, and the gentle breeze blowing across the plains, Suimei and Lefille chatted with one another.

"—And the Goddess Arshuna?"

"Ah, she is the creator of heaven and earth, the one who maintains the existence of this world. This is what the Church of Salvation teaches. She is the Most High, standing above all others."

"I see..."

Suimei pondered as he listened to Lefille's words.

As they walked, Lefille explained the doctrine of the Goddess Arshuna. At their first meeting in the guild, they'd already had a short discussion about the church, and Suimei had thus realized that he had a serious gap in knowledge when it came to the beliefs of the people in this world. At some point unknown to him, Lefille had become aware of this situation. Suimei had thus decided that this was a perfect opportunity to have her teach him some basic knowledge.

On that note, it looks like pretty much everyone in this world is a monotheistic believer of the Most High Goddess, Arshuna.

In other words, it didn't seem like there were any deities other than Arshuna.

Transforming the primal chaos of origin into the current world was the work of a god.

Borrowing the power of the elements, and infusing magic with said power was equivalent to borrowing the power of the Goddess. Although the Mazoku worshiped a similar existence in the Evil God, the Church of Salvation utterly rejected the notion that it was a god.

"Furthermore, even though our races may be different, all acknowledge the existence of the Goddess Arshuna, whether it be the spirits, the dwarves, the beastmen, or the dragonewts (dragonmen)."

"Hmm—"

Lefille had unconsciously raised a point of interest for Suimei, who reacted.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just that from what you've said, demihuman tribes exist as well."

"Well, of course. ...Wait, do they not appear where you're from?"

"Only in conversation."

Although it might have been a vague way of expressing things, it wasn't false. When it came to fantasy stories, their existence was nothing if not expected. These tribes seemed to be a normal part of life in this world, and so Suimei's answer was likely fine.

That said, I certainly didn't see any in Mehter—

"Well then, you'll get your first chance to see them once we reach

Nelferia. That place is a melting pot of races. Spirits and dragonewts are a bit rare, but there are a lot of beastmen. —Oh, that reminds me, we seem to have gotten a bit off-topic. Did you have any other questions about the Goddess?”

“Nope. This is plenty for today. Thanks; I’ve learned a lot.”

Respectfully, Suimei expressed his gratitude to Lefille who had earnestly taught him without the least manifestation of impatience.

Lefille smiled brightly, denying that her efforts had been worthy of thanks.

“It’s nothing. On that note, does that mean the Goddess Arshuna doesn’t exist in the east?”

“Hahaha, well, you could say that...” Suimei answered vaguely.

“Existence” was a word for things that were concrete. Putting aside an observable, accessible concept like elements, as far as the people of this world were concerned, the Goddess Arshuna was not some sort of ambiguous concept, but rather a certainty.

Given this, it was perhaps most appropriate to view this existence as a natural, if unique, phenomenon.

From a magician’s perspective, “gods” were largely just a conceptual existence, an external force that interfered with the world. In practice, this view seemed to be more or less on point.

That brought an end to that topic.

Suimei turned his gaze to Lefille, walking beside him. Unlike the first time they’d met, this time she was carrying her luggage.

The girl carried on her back a pack just large enough to fit the armor she'd worn earlier, as well as an enormous piece of luggage.

"...Is something the matter, Suimei-kun?"

"Oh, I was just thinking that that bag you're carrying is pretty huge."

"Oh, this?" she replied, looking back.

On the back of this girl, of a height roughly on par with Suimei, was an extremely long piece of luggage – longer than she was tall – wrapped in cloth.

Moreover, judging by the shape, was it perhaps—

"It's been pretty eye-catching right from the start, to be honest. It's a sword, right?"

"Yep."

Lefille nodded acknowledgment of Suimei's guess. It looked like that gigantic thing was indeed a sword.

Its size was stunning even at first glance, and closer consideration only reinforced that feeling. It looked like it was the kind of weapon that was meant to chop giant bears in two.

Without a doubt, however, by far the most astounding thing was Lefille's strength, able to carry such a burden on her back as she walked, all the while never showing the least sign of strain or sweat.

Even though he'd previously seen her carry a slender sword, the cognitive dissonance created by the sight of this enormous weapon and a young girl's physique was simply too exaggerated. Along those lines, how could those slender arms possibly support the inevitably massive weight of

such a thing? That said, if she was bringing it, she was definitely capable of using it. Perhaps she had a reinforcement magic similar to the “Burn Boost” Reiji had used back in the palace.

“Why would you choose something like that for your weapon of choice?”

Even setting aside the issue of whether or not she was capable of wielding this massive sword, it didn’t seem like a weapon appropriate for a young woman.

In response to his words, Lefille gave the weapon on her back a loving glance.

“This is a family heirloom. Its previous owner was my father, from whom I inherited it.”

“Does that mean you used a different type of weapon at first?”

“No.”

If it was an inheritance from her father, then there had to have been some period of time before it’d come into her possession. Lefille refuted this idea, however, swinging her arms as though the sword were in her hands.

“I’ve immersed myself in swordsmanship ever since I was but a child, always dreaming of the day that I’d be able to swing a sword like this.”

“I guess that means you’re pretty confident about using it,” Suimei asked, slightly ill-naturedly.

Lefille’s response was candid.

“Hehe. Unfortunately, it’s for that very reason that I’m not proficient in anything but the sword.”

“Not at all. I think you’re pretty amazing. I know a thing or two about

swordsmanship, but when it comes to using a sword like that, I haven't the least confidence."

Lefille's self-mocking words were met with a tone of respect.

Swords weren't something you wielded simply with strength. When it came to slashing, then certainly arm strength was a key factor, but actual battle skills were another thing altogether. Effectively wielding a sword in battle didn't just require a certain amount of strength, but also the bodily control to flourish it as desired.

Anyway, when Suimei spoke of his inability to use such a weapon, the primary reason was that its weight and size were beyond his body's ability to support.

It was likely because of Lefille's mastery of a sword like this that she had chosen it as her primary weapon.

That was also likely the reason that she uttered the words that came next.

"—It's nothing special. With a little practice, anyone'd be able to chop a semi-giant in two with this."

"..."

I misheard her just now. MISHEARD. Lefille had just said something insane with a casual tone. Seriously, there's not a chance in hell you could learn how to chop a semi-giant – a being capable of destroying a city wall with its fists – in two with just "a little practice"! Her earlier words, that she had taken down the semi-giant only with the aid of her companions, were now clearly naught but hollow modesty.

That meant that this young girl hadn't even come close to going all out in her ranking battle. Comparing her ability with the master swordsmen of

his world put her on an entirely different plane of existence.

As Suimei shook his head, Lefille took the opportunity to ask a question of her own.

“Suimei-kun, can I ask what you’re best at?”

“I didn’t hear anything. I HEARD NOTHING! —Eh?”

“Suimei-kun? Are you alright?”

“Eh? Oh, ohhhh. I, well... pretty much this.”

Finally realizing that the topic of conversation had shifted, Suimei showed his answer, rather than spoke it.

To make it easy for her to understand, he concentrated mana in the palm of his hand.

That made the answer apparent. Lefille, who had asked without really thinking, showed an expression of understanding.

“Magic, right? Well, I guess since you’re a mage, that should have been pretty obvious.”

“Although it has to be said that when I first started, there was a period when I was pretty much clueless.”

“Clueless?”

Lefille’s question caused him to think for a bit before responding, a somewhat perplexed smile on his face.

“Yes. Lefille, when you first started to learn how to use a sword, what did they tell you?”

“—Hmm, well, it’d always be these long, drawn-out lectures that always

started from the origin of it all, leading up to the reason why it was necessary that I wield a sword, etc. My ears practically bled I heard it so many times,” she answered, half-jokingly.

That even the origin of swords was a point of instruction showed just what history lay behind it all.

As Suimei envisioned that scene in his mind, he remembered what it was like when he had first started to learn magic.

That was a thing already many years in the past. When he was young, his father had brought him to the one room in their house where entry was forbidden, and there—

“...My father wasn’t the type to talk much. I never had an experience like yours. It’s just that, from the very start, he told me that this was something I had to master.”

“He didn’t even give you a reason?”

“Well, that much he did. It wasn’t a reason that a young child could understand, though. Moreover, I never had any intention of asking, and so he never spoke about it. Unfortunately, for that very reason, it wasn’t until very late that I heard the answer from my father.”

His tone was nostalgic as he spoke, as the scene from his memory replayed itself before his eyes.

Indeed, by the time he’d heard the reason, he’d already long since begun to tread the path of a magician. It was entirely possible that had “that incident” not occurred, his father would have taken that answer with him to the grave.

Thinking along those lines, it occurred to him that perhaps the reason his

father had taught him magic was that he had seen it as the one thing he could do for his son as a father.

"Is that really alright?" Lefille asked next.

"Yeah. I enjoy learning magic. It's not something I at all resent. Although I have to say it's brought on its fair share of hardship as well."

"Is that so?" Lefille said with a laugh, thinking to herself that what had just been said was of interest.

"...Mm? Did I say something strange?"

"Not at all. I was just surprised to find that there's someone like me."

Indeed, that was it.

"That we're both burdened people is something I can definitely agree on."

"Definitely."

Lefille nodded. It looked like his words had been spot on. She must have also encountered more than a few obstacles as she advanced down the path of swordsmanship.

As he mused, a thought seemed to have come to Lefille's mind.

"—That reminds me, Suimei-kun. In the end, what rank did they give you?"

"Ahh— I was given a D-rank."

His answer left her stunned.

"...Why? I, who defeated them in succession, was given a B-rank. How is it possible that you, who defeated them simultaneously, are a D-rank?"

"Yeah, about that..."

What had his words made her think? Suddenly, as if she'd come to a conclusion, her gaze sharpened. The laughing tone she'd used until this point suddenly turned frigid.

"So that's how it is. So even an organization as renowned as the guild would pull something like this. Hmph. I would never have imagined that they'd straight up manipulate guild ranks just to save some face..."

"Wha...?"

Her sudden and complete misunderstanding left Suimei flustered. He would never have guessed she'd arrive at such a conclusion.

"Well, isn't that what happened? That seems like the only logical conclusion?"

"No, no. While I can't deny that reasoning, but still..."

"No, I can't accept such a thing. Once we get to Kurand, let's head to the branch office and raise a complaint. Don't worry, I'll go with you. If they try to pull something again, I'll act as the witness and have them perform the exam once more."

With that, Lefille mumbled, "Right, let's do that," and other such things to herself.

This totally isn't her problem, why does she care so much? It looked like Lefille was the kind of person who wouldn't let acts of injustice stand.

In the end, what it came down to was the fact that she was serious about helping Suimei "bring the truth to light", something that he could not allow her to do.

Instead—

"...To be honest with you, my D-rank is something I personally requested of those three. That's why rank's so low."

What he had said was so nonsensical that Lefille, frowning, looked at him in confusion.

"You asked for it? Why would you do something like that?"

"When Dorothea said that I'd gain a reputation, it really gave me pause."

Although his explanation was pretty flimsy indeed, he was unable to come up with anything better.

However, as with his conversation with Galeo earlier, it had to be said that his words weren't exactly a lie either. Certainly, a high rank wasn't necessarily a good thing.

Can't say as I see Lefille being convinced by that, though... he sighed inwardly. Unexpectedly, however, Lefille seemed to take his words at face value.

"Is that really okay with you? A high rank should prove extremely valuable even in Kurand and Nelferia, you know? There really isn't anything to be gained by holding on to such a low rank."

That was certainly true, providing that he planned to live off of the work provided by the Twilight Pavilion. That was not, however, the case.

"I'm not really that hung up on working for the guild, although I can't say I want to be poor either. It's fine."

"...Just what exactly do you plan to do by going to Kurand and the Empire?"

"Well, gather some information, I guess."

"Information?"

"Coming from the east, there's still a lot I don't know about things here. I need to learn."

"..."

His harmless reasoning was met by a silent stare.

She watched him closely, her tight gaze seemingly reading right through him, interpreting the true meaning behind his words and expression.

When it came to Lefille, Suimei was determined to play the fool to the end.

"Did I say something strange?"

"No, I was just trying to decide if you were lying just now. —Actually, 'lying' is the wrong word. You weren't lying, but you weren't telling the whole truth either."

How? Suimei didn't think there were any logical gaps in what he'd said just now.

"...And why would you think that?" he asked with some surprise, a wry smile on his face.

"Women's intuition."

"Again with the unreliable stuff."

"Hehe, I was just joking, actually. That said, I've met a lot of people, so I can see through a thing or two," she offered in explanation, simultaneously praising herself. "—You haven't lied to me, but you're certainly hiding a ton of secrets. I'm 100% sure that's the case."

"...Perhaps."

In response to Lefille's discerning comment, Suimei gave a vague reply and shrugged his shoulders. There wasn't any real need to vehemently reject her words. This should be fine.

"...Alright then. It doesn't seem like this is something I should stick my nose into. I won't say anything more about your rank," she said finally.

"Don't worry about it. And thank you."

Although on the surface of things, Suimei was apologetic, but he wasn't actually sorry for he'd handled the issue. He was, after all, a magician, and magicians were the kind of people that frequently made those who were honest and upright feel guilty. For that reason, he had no real need to apologize to Lefille, who was just such a person.

Suddenly, a sound caught his attention.

"—Oh, time for a break."

"By that watering hole over there, huh," Lefille said after a quick glance.

By the side of the road, was a small area that had been renovated, although that might have been a bit of an overstatement for an area that simply had some fairly flat stones that were to be used as seating. It appeared to have been designed as a rest stop along the road.

Even though his conversation with Lefille had finally reached a climax, if they had continued further, it would only have brought on more trouble, Suimei thought to himself as he and Lefille followed the others to the rest site.

When suddenly—

"...?"

Had he just heard a shout?

While the sound hadn't come from that far off, it hadn't been that close either. Looking in the direction of the sound, he saw a robed young girl waving from over by the waterfront.

At her side were gathered a few of what looked to be companions. The young girl was a mage, while the others were warriors, swordsmen, and archers.

Judging by the roles they had assembled, they would have passed for a balanced party in a game, drawing extreme interest from Suimei. That said, he certainly was not acquainted with them.

"Those are the companions that took down the semi-giant with me."

"Ohh, so that's them."

Lefille's remark dissipated his confusion. So those are the aforementioned guild adventurers, huh.

"We were on pretty good terms while together. We've had some interactions before."

As Lefille explained, the young girl cupped her hands to her mouth like a megaphone. Judging by her actions, she seemed to have decided they hadn't heard.

"I think they're calling for you."

"Looks like it. I'm going to head over there for a bit," she replied before setting off in their direction.

Before his eyes, a joyous reunion took place.

"Companions, huh..." he murmured.

If he had to be honest with himself, the sight made him somewhat envious. That notwithstanding, this was undoubtedly a path that he had chosen for himself. He didn't have the right to indulge himself in such a feeling.

He exhaled deeply, as if to purge the unnecessary feeling from his body as well, when a sudden sensation caused him to rub his neck.

"..."

...He wasn't sure why, but ever since he'd left Mehter, his back would feel strangely warm at times. It wasn't at all a good feeling – an ill omen perhaps? Any other person would likely have discounted the feeling, deciding that they were simply overthinking things. When Suimei, however, had experienced this in the past, it had always proven to be eerily prescient. He had the feeling his father had once explained the reason for this phenomenon, but try as he might, he just couldn't recall.

...In a flash, he focused on his surroundings, though he was unable to find any hint of someone in chase.

I guess I'm worrying about nothing, he decided, discarding that line of thought as he looked up toward the sky.

The wind was blowing westward. The gentle, refreshing breeze blew past his body, bringing with it the air of this other world – mild and untouched by pollution – setting his heart at ease.

The weather seemed to be giving its blessing, wishing them a smooth and uneventful trip, an atmosphere without the least hint of danger.

And yet, for some unknown reason, as he gazed up at the heavens engulfing the road ahead, he couldn't help but shake the feeling that the

wind and the clouds were slowly but surely undergoing a transformation.

CHAPTER 20

THE WHEREABOUTS OF REIJI'S PARTY

—Just when had this battle begun?

Having been far too focused to care about the passage of time, he'd already lost all sense of what time it currently was.

The light reflecting off his sword's edge flickered from tip to base, and the man – Shana Reiji – dashed ahead in the same direction.

The drawn blade was, of course, aimed at his enemy, who stood before him.

Its gaze was drawn to his fierce attack, and it roared strangely.

Reiji, on the other hand, slashed as if to part it in two.

It was a vertical slash from high to low, a lightning-infused strike using the power bestowed upon him by the Goddess.

His opponent met his attack with a swipe of its claws.

That blow came from a hand many times larger than a human's, one which was seemingly dyed the deepest, darkest pitch.

As their swings collided, the claws interrupted the progress of Reiji's attack.

Claw and sword struggled, locked in stalemate as the sound of hard object colliding with hard object filled the air.

A nervewracking sound that seemed to cry out for victory.

Reiji poured everything he had into his sword, as if to literally suppress his foe beneath his blade.

Locked in stalemate as they were, simply throwing his full power into his

attack wouldn't directly defeat his target, but it would exhaust its strength. Thus, as far as Reiji was concerned, this action was currently needed. As long as he was able to continuously accumulate damage on his enemy in this manner, then sooner or later its defense would break, and he would claim victory.

——□□□□□□ ! (TN: No, that's not a font failure; that's intentional.)

That strange howl sounded again, filling his ears.

Despite being capable of human speech, once battle began, it'd reverted to a beast-like state, thus making it apparent just what sort of creature this was.

Concurrent with the roar, sharp, clawed fingers rushed in from his left side, forcing Reiji to duck to avoid the incoming blow.

This attack seemed more like swatting at a hated thing than a targeted strike, and so it lacked the ability to endanger his life.

It was intended only to halt his movements, a futile attempt to force him to show an opening.

Reiji swung again, an attack fully utilizing the traits of this double-edged blade. A vertical swing which defied the pull of gravity, from down low to up high.

It was a marvelous technique further empowered by wind magic, but his target's beast-like reactions allowed it to avoid the attack at the last moment.

“—O F-flame! Sting Scarlet!”

Suddenly, an incantation, whose stammered words revealed its master's

continued unfamiliarity with the situation, was spoken. The voice belonged to Mizuki, offering him protection. The released magic was an intermediate Fire spell, a veritable crimson baptism.

The magic, its invocation keyword and two-verse incantation having been spoken, activated, and curling bands of flame appeared in the air, casting a dense scarlet against the backdrop of the blue sky.

The air exploded.

Everything in his sight was dyed in orange.

The shockwave created by the small explosion rushed toward him.

Without hesitating, he leapt backward. In the next instant, as if to mock its target, the flame changed form, flowing downward as if to swallow the enemy whole.

The moment it touched the enemy, the flame's power exploded. The flame, having found a fuel source – even if that fuel source was a living being – burst, simultaneously igniting the creature contained within its depths.

“I did it!”

Behind him, Mizuki shouted in joy. Her joy, however, was premature. She seemed to have thought her magic had been a fatal strike, but there was yet life still in her target.

Peering into the flame, he observed that their foe was still moving.

Just as he gripped his sword and shifted into a combat stance, the flame magic was blown away.

It looked like it had blown the flame away with a swing of its arm.

Standing within the fiery embers left behind, their enemy stood with one arm held outstretched.

Standing there within a heat so intense that it warped the air itself, it emitted an overwhelming pressure.

Having attacked him, regardless of his status as the Hero, this, the sole survivor – its comrades' corpses littering the floor – was his true enemy.

In this scenery filled with the dead, it took a step forward. Reiji eyed his opponent, awaiting an opportunity.

This was no human. No, this was a monster. Even though it was humanoid, this was something other than human – a Mazoku.

Bat-like wings stretched out from its back and twin horns sprouted forth from its head, its entire body the color of rust. Aside from the nose, eyes, and mouth on its face, it bore not the least resemblance to humans. In its entirety, it reminded one of nothing so much as the devils of myth and legend.

The pitch black claws that came flying at him gave off a dull gleam.

The fearsome might of those claws was clearly evidenced by the shattered remnants of the boulders that lay around them.

Coupled with terrific, inhuman arm strength, the claws tipping the five fingers of each hand were like the scythe of the Reaper himself.

The Mazoku cracked a smile, a mocking, condescending grin. Having withstood everything they'd thrown at it so far this battle, it seemed to have developed an unshakable confidence.

In their confrontation so far, Reiji's all had been unable to match his

opponent's, whether it be with respect to speed or strength. Accordingly, an expression appeared on Reiji's face, demonstrating his resolve to conclude everything with the next strike.

—The Mazoku took action. A storm of sand was thrown up behind it as it accelerated in his direction. That lightning speed was on an altogether different level from what it had shown previously.

A vision of his body being torn to shreds passed before his eyes: the sheer strength and speed of the attack sending his sword flying, his body powerless in the face of those ferocious claws.

However, that was only presuming that Reiji were to allow the “current situation” to continue, of course—

“Burn Boost...”

Mana began to circulate within his body as fire element reacted to his call.

Power is in my grasp.

That unfeeling invocation filled his body with power. Reinforcement magic.

As the flame enveloped his body, power sprang forth in abundance. That overflowing, omnipotent feeling turned into a brilliant, light that shot toward his enemy.

——■■■■■ ! ?

The expression on the face of the Mazoku, charging toward him, changed.

It had been certain of its victory. That judgment, however, had been incorrect. This was Reiji's first time invoking this reinforcement magic

during this confrontation.

“Oooooooooohhhh!”

Despite Reiji’s power having shot up, the Mazoku remained confident of its victory. Demanding a price for its arrogance, Reiji ignored the Mazoku’s strange cry, and roaring himself, raised his strength another level, and gripping his sword, slashed directly at the head of the incoming enemy.

...Within the dying embers of flame, the tiny particles of dust that had been cast into the air turned to nothingness. Confirming that their enemies were now thoroughly eradicated, Reiji panted for breath.

“Fuu... Looks like today’s another victory.”

☆

—Before Suimei had left Mehter.

Reiji’s party, having left the palace, had not headed directly for their final destination – the Maou – but were instead headed for the United Sadias Autonomous Territories.

It might have seemed to an outsider that they were fleeing from the Maou, but they had a reason for deviating from the purpose for which they had been brought to this world.

Mizuki and Reiji had been summoned from peaceful Japan, and thus could be said to gravely lacking in combat experience. The closest thing they’d ever experienced to real combat had been the training sessions they’d had in the palace.

Subsequently, were they to rely solely on the training they’d received, the

power they'd been given through the summoning process, and the magic they had learned, then defeat was essentially an inevitability.

To remedy this deficiency, they were taking a more circuitous route that would enable them to gain the experience they so sorely needed.

This would simultaneously allow them to thin out the Maou's forces, another positive. To both obtain a weapon as well as enhance their skills yet further, they had decided to head first to Sadias and meet one of the Seven Swords who had been stationed there.

They had been ambushed along the way, resulting in the battle that had just concluded.

...His orichalcum blade, drenched in Mazoku blood, glittered brilliantly.

With a flick of his weapon, a first-rate holy sword from Sadias, he dispatched the final Mazoku. Confirming that it had drawn its last breath, he rushed to Mizuki's side.

"Mizuki, are you okay?"

Noticing that her shoulders trembled as she gasped for air with an ashen face, Reiji voiced his concern.

The aftertaste of the battle seemed to linger with her still.

"Oh, yeah. Somehow. It's just that..."

"Just that...?"

"So this... is a battle with the enemy..." Mizuki struggled out, her face still pale.

"...Ah."

Reiji nodded firmly.

To reach this point, they had fought monsters numerous times already. This was a fantasy world with countless undeveloped regions. Along those lines, they had been seen and been attacked by many predators that did not exist in their original world.

Eliminating the threat as you progressed forward seemed to be a matter-of-fact aspect of life in this world. And indeed, they had done just this as they had progressed to this point.

However, never before had Mizuki actually taken part in battle. It had been the judgment of the knights who accompanied them that it was best for her to first familiarize herself with the rigors of battle, and so she had been a passive student until now.

Her proficiency in magic had already reached the point where it rivaled both Titania and himself, and she had even learned advanced-class spells. But none of that changed the fact that she was still just a young girl from Japan.

In their own world, this could be said to be the demographic with the least to do with battle. Before the issue of combat ability even entered the equation, her resolve to participate in battle was of far greater import. And so she had needed some time to adjust. This had thus become her first true experience taking part in battle at his side.

“Mizuki. I still think it best that you don’t push yourself..”

Once more Reiji expressed the sincere feelings of his heart: he really didn’t think it necessary that she fight as well.

Mizuki, however, shook her head, rejecting his concern.

“No. To simply stand by and watch isn’t something I can do. It’s true that this is my first time, and it’s true that the Mazoku are incredibly scary, but the entire reason I came was to help you.”

“Mizuki...”

“...Though even if I say that, I have to say... you’re amazing. Reiji-kun, it’s like you were used to this from the very beginning.”

“There’s no way that’s true. When I first started, I, too, felt that battle is a truly terrible thing. Even now that I’m more used to it, my heart is still pounding in my chest.”

Those weren’t hollow words meant for Mizuki’s comfort – they were true. Just like Mizuki, he hadn’t been able to rid himself of the fear that came with battle.

Even though he had come for the express purpose of defeating the Maou, but after encountering the terrifying, inhuman might of “his” soldiers, in his heart, he felt that the task had already exceeded the bounds of his ability. Recently, he hadn’t been able to avoid the uncertainty that had gripped his heart and the second-guessing that had filled his thoughts.

...Suimei.

Suddenly, the face of his friend appeared in his mind.

His friend, back at the palace – Yakagi Suimei – had seen the reality of the situation. “Talk is cheap, actually doing it is pretty much impossible,” he’d rebutted. Now it looked like that had indeed been a most accurate assessment of the situation.

When compared with himself, who having attained a modicum of power had thought himself invincible— Actually, it was probably

precisely because Suimei had not received the gift of power that he had been able to maintain a clear head and accurately discern just what it was that lay ahead of him on the path that he had chosen.

At the time, he'd allowed his ideals to blind him. Placed in an extraordinary circumstance, using his views developed from the modern world to judge this fantasy world, he'd deceived himself.

The desperate pleas of the people of this world, crying out for a savior, and their flattering words assuring him that he had what it took had given him the feeling that he could do anything. A deceptive, inaccurate feeling. He'd underestimated the terror that plagued this world.

Though he didn't want to describe his actions as "foolish", that was the only word that seemed appropriate to describe what he had done.

If he continued down this path, then perhaps the situation could change. Fear continued to hold him in its grasp – he lacked both experience and technique. He acted now to strengthen himself, to compensate for his flaws as much as possible before the time came when he would challenge the Maou.

His thoughts, though superficial, were accompanied by a plan.

—That notwithstanding, the fact that he had not thought things through would not disappear, nor would the sin of having gotten that female friend of his wrapped up in all of this.

Sorry...

To Mizuki, her head bowed as she continued to gasp for air, Reiji apologized again. He'd already apologized so many times that it begun to wear on her, and so this time, he apologized only within his heart.

That said, he knew his apology was only to salve his feelings of guilt. Fully aware of his own weakness, Reiji nevertheless continued to do so.

"...Should we go somewhere else?"

"...Sure."

Taking Mizuki, who had raised the idea, with him, Reiji left the corpse-littered battlefield.

"—Mizuki! Are you alright?!" a young girl cried out from nearby, none other than their companion, Titania.

She and the knights with her had dispatched the Mazoku that had appeared elsewhere. They saw her leave the side of a middle-aged knight, and race toward them.

"Mm. I'm okay," Mizuki replied.

"Thank goodness... You don't look to have been injured, right?"

"Because Reiji-kun was with me."

They held each one another tightly as they talked. Relieved smile met courageous smile, finally bringing a sense of calm to the air.

"Good work, Tia."

Standing by their side, Reiji offered words of praise.

"Thank you for your concern, Reiji-sama," she said in reply, bowing.

"It's nothing. Good work on your end too, Gregory-san."

The middle-aged knight who was her constant companion – Gregory – met Reiji's words with his typical solemn demeanor.

"Not at all. I'm simply fulfilling my duties to support Her Highness. You

flatter me.”

“Oh, don’t say that,” Reiji said, refuting his modesty.

“You flatter me,” was again Gregory’s reply, his head bowed.

“—Anyway, Tia. How were things on your end?”

“Right. We finished up just fine. There is not a single Mazoku left over there.”

“That’s Tia for you. You’re so reliable.”

“I’m nothing compared with Reiji-sama. That said—”

“What’s up?”

“...Our horses were all killed. My sincerest apologies.”

“...Oh. Although I feel for the horses that have done their best to carry us until now, as long as you and the others are safe, Tia, that’s what matters.”

“Reiji-sama...”

Titania was moved by his words of encouragement. Losing their horses would greatly affect their movement from this point on, but Reiji had chosen instead to delight in the fact that no human life had been lost. Suddenly, a troubled voice spoke.

“...So Titania’s already accustomed to battle.”

“Yes. While I can’t say that my experience is by any means plentiful, I do have some measure of actual combat experience.”

Titania’s words evoked a strange expression from Mizuki.

“You’re an honest-to-goodness princess. Why would you have battle

experience?”

“At the time we decided we were going to summon a Hero, I resolved to stay by their side. Thus, I made sure to prepare myself accordingly for this eventuality.”

“I get it now...”

Mizuki expressed understanding.

Titania was, after all, the princess of a country. Even though their circumstances were decidedly different, she had expected that Titania would be someone uninvolved with combat, like herself. At the same time, though, she understood that in a world as cruel as this, sooner or later, battle would find you.

Titania had continually taken part in monster hunting parties, fighting at their side as a magician. Her noble air and dignified bearing notwithstanding, the strength and determination of one who had experienced real combat had always adorned this young woman from the first.

The reason for this she now understood.

Hence her voice had tapered off at the end, a manifestation of her lack of confidence. It was as though she had tripped and fallen behind those walking by her side, although given Mizuki’s background, such a thing was only to be expected. Recognizing Mizuki’s disappointment, Titania offered words of reassurance.

“Mizuki. Please don’t feel so down. When I first started, I was just like you. Or rather, worse by far.”

“...Really?”

"Absolutely. When I first tried to acclimatize myself to battle, I went through just what you're going through now. At the end of my first battle, I fell right on my rear, collapsing on the ground."

"Really? But you're so familiar with fighting?"

"That's because I've already accumulated a fair amount of combat experience. Because I knew that if I was going to accompany the Hero on his travels, I couldn't just continue being like that."

"And that's why you're like this now?"

"Exactly. That's pretty much it."

"Okay," Mizuki nodded strongly, her unease more or less dispelled.

Watching the two support one another, Reiji couldn't help but feel his spirits lift.

Perhaps things really would work out.

Mizuki, who had until just previously somewhat held herself in contempt, seemed to be alright now. Her sense of self-awareness hadn't fully ripened yet, but she had nonetheless managed to once again muster up her courage.

It was then, with the mood as it was...

Who knew why, but Mizuki frowned again, something bothering her once more. Just when her mood was finally improving. What just happened?

"I wonder if Suimei-kun is doing okay..."

With that, Reiji understood what was worrying her.

And so.

“Suimei, huh. He definitely said that he was planning to leave the palace in just a bit...”

“Hmm. Outside the city... The districts immediately out of the city should be just fine, but there are many dangerous areas along the road or in the wilderness. Even if he leaves the city, as long as he doesn’t stray too far, he shouldn’t have to worry about monsters.”

“Is that so? Even though he rejected the invitation to join us, I don’t think he’ll travel alone. That said, without the blessing of the Goddess that you have, Reiji-sama, or the instruction in magic that you have, Mizuki, I worry just as you do. If he leaves the city and runs into a monster, I don’t imagine he’ll be able to defend himself,” Titania said with a strained look.

It was just as she’d said. He didn’t think it likely that Suimei would travel alone, but as he thought of his material needs – food and water, the distance he’d have to travel, and the danger he’d have to face, he understood why the girls were worried.

That notwithstanding, there was still a slight difference between the way he and the girls saw things.

“No, Suimei will be fine.”

“...? Why do you say that, Reiji-sama?”

“Suimei knows kenjutsu. Even if he wanders outside, I’m certain he’ll overcome any obstacles with ease.”

Titania was shocked by this unexpected answer.

“Suimei knows how to use a sword?”

“Yep.”

Reiji reaffirmed this fact as he watched the pair. He was surprised to see that Mizuki seemed taken aback as well, her gaze sweeping over to meet him as she shook her head as if to say that that this was the first she'd ever heard of it.

Yes, Suimei knew kenjutsu, though due to the legal restrictions placed on the practice back home, he'd likely never wielded an actual sword. Either way, Suimei was undoubtedly a swordsman.

"But Reiji-kun, Suimei-kun isn't a member of the kendo club?" Mizuki asked.

As she'd said, Suimei was not a member of the kendo club, but rather of the so-called "go-home club". From what Suimei had told him, he often had to travel abroad for family reasons, and thus was unable to participate normally in club activities.

Titania, who was obviously unaware of what it meant that he was a member of the go-home club, was visibly puzzled, so Mizuki explained.

Reiji spoke next.

"From what I understand, he doesn't take part in club activities, but rather trains at a dojo near his house."

"Hmm? There was a dojo near there...?"

"Yeah. A dojo that teaches self-defense," he answered succinctly, the map of their city passing through his mind as he spoke.

With that, Mizuki seemed to suddenly recall a certain location.

"Oh, that place? Isn't that a self-defense class intended for women? It's really well-known, but from what I've heard, it's not a kendo dojo?"

"Yep. The sign says that they teach self-defense, but originally they're a dojo that practices an ancient martial art. Various volunteers will pass down different kinds of teachings."

"Really?! It's that kind of place?!"

"That's what Suimei said, anyway."

"No way... There's a few girls in our class who go there... Ancient martial arts..."

His thorough explanation notwithstanding, Mizuki seemed nevertheless thoroughly surprised. She'd known they taught self-defense, but she hadn't realized the extent of it.

To be fair, that such a place existed nearby was beyond expectation. When he'd first learned of it, he'd shouted in surprise.

"Does that mean that Suimei-kun is a successor of an ancient martial art, like a character from a manga?"

"That seems to be the case, yeah."

This time, Titania was the one to speak.

"From what you've said, Suimei seems to be a martial artist."

"Mm. That said, our world is a peaceful place, and you can't compare him with someone who's learned combat over here. Either way, though, Suimei's a swordsman. That's for sure."

"I see. My impression of him was that he was thoroughly unacquainted with violence. This certainly comes as quite a surprise."

"Definitely. Just looking at him, you can't tell at all, but from what I know, his skills should be at quite an amazing level."

The truth was, when it came to the precise details, Reiji wasn't all that clear himself either.

He'd never visited the aforementioned dojo, and although they'd fought thugs side by side, Suimei had naturally never used his swordsmanship at those times. Thus Reiji had never actually seen Suimei's skills.

Titania, however, seemed certain that Reiji was being overly optimistic.

"Even still, I don't think that's enough to determine that he'll be just fine," she rebutted.

Her voice held a noticeable trace of unease, perhaps because she'd imagined what kind of troubles he might find himself facing. Plus, he had to admit, swordsmanship alone would not be enough to guarantee his safety.

In truth, Suimei had never before fought a monster, and whether or not techniques developed for use on humans would be of any use against monsters remained to be seen.

Subsequently, it seemed impossible to guarantee that Suimei would be fine.

However.

"You're still not getting the whole picture. Suimei is the kind of guy who almost never shows any openings... While his behavior can be pretty unorthodox at times, he's fundamentally a very cautious person."

"You mean to say that he should be able to escape even if he runs into monsters? From what I've heard, though, the vast majority of people simply freeze on the spot when they run into and are stared down by a monster."

“That, huh. If it’s Suimei we’re talking about, that kind of oppressive atmosphere might as well be the caress of a gentle breeze.”

“Really...”

Mizuki frowned, unable to believe his words. It was because she now thoroughly understood just how dangerous this world truly was that she now wore such an expression.

Nevertheless, it was true that Suimei was the kind of person who didn’t seem to know what the meaning of the word fear was. Once before, he’d been surrounded by a group of hoodlums. His response? Without the least hint of anxiety, he’d simply said, “What? That’s it?” When faced with violence, from start to finish, he’d never lost the least bit of calm. —But enough on that for now.

Moreover, as far as Reiji knew, he never took his enemies on directly, either. To be frank, he was the kind of person who enjoyed exploiting your weaknesses. On that note, when it came to wheeling and dealing, Suimei was many times his superior.

“Anyway, that’s why I’m not really all that worried.”

“If you say so, Reiji-sama...”

Declaring that she wouldn’t mind the issue any longer, Titania dropped the topic.

Mizuki, however, suddenly turned, seemingly having thought of something else.

“...So, Reiji-kun. Has Suimei-kun ever said anything like ‘I’m Yakagi Suimei, a swordsman of the such-and-such school!’ Or has he ever shown off some amazing sword skills?”

"Huh? No, that's a bit..."

"We're talking about ancient martial arts here! Ancient martial arts! Skills that completely overpower the kind taught today, supreme techniques developed solely for the purpose of taking lives!"

Judging by her insane fervor, just what kind of delusions did Mizuki have about ancient martial arts? Although when it came to the nature of these techniques, it couldn't be denied that they were meant to kill, that didn't guarantee that they were completely a level above current martial arts.

Anyway, from what he'd heard from Suimei, there weren't really any major differences between what he'd learned and what was currently taught as kendo.

However, Tia looked to believe Mizuki completely.

"K-killing techniques...?"

"Yep! Exactly, Tia! Ancient Japanese martial arts were designed with the assumption that a fight could break out at any moment. Also! Both sides strike at the same time and victory and defeat are determined with a single strike! We're talking about swordsmanship that has reached the level of gods!"

"...!"

Overwhelmed by Mizuki's words and intense expression, Titania gulped.

Anyway, putting all these ridiculous things together.. What kind of demonic, Asura-like martial art was this supposed to be?

"...Granted, I don't think Suimei-kun is likely to have attained such a level."

“O-oh...”

That was indeed the truth.

Some moments after Mizuki’s tirade had ended, for God only knows what reason, she suddenly puffed up her cheeks, pouting.

“Hmph! Suimei-kun is definitely a chuunibyou! Hiding his true colors like that— How do I put this? It’s so sneaky!”

So that’s what had made her mad. It wasn’t so much that she was angry at the fact that he’d hidden his abilities, as that she was jealous of how he’d secretly gone and learned techniques of this nature.

However.

“E-even if you say that, Suimei doesn’t say any chuuni things like you, Mizuki, so you can’t just assume that he’s a chuunibyou... Oh.”

It was only after he’d spoken the forbidden word that he realized what he’d said.

Looking at Mizuki, he saw her smile take on a sinister undertone.

“Re~i~ji~kun~”

“S-s-sorry! It just slipped out!”

“You promised! Forgetting is absolutely not allowed!”

“R-right.”

Indeed, he’d previously sworn never to mention that again. Mizuki’s past which she wanted desperately to remain in the past. Using her words, it was a girl’s “secret garden.”

Titania, on the other hand—

“Mizuki. What does ‘chuunibyou’ mean?”

“Uwa?! ...That, um, well...”

“What kind of thing is it? Don’t tell me it’s some sort of terrible illness?”

(TN: The last character (病) in chuunibyou (中二病), means illness or sickness.)

“Y-y-yeah! YEAH! That’s exactly it! It’s something that the vast majority of preteens in our world suffer from! A vicious illness that leaves terrifying aftereffects!”

Titania’s question threw Mizuki into a panic, and her frantic answer was accompanied by wild gestures as she attempted to lie the issue away.

Even though Mizuki seemed determined to prevent discussion of this topic at all costs, but to be quite honest, this was really just reaping the consequences of her own actions.

Nevertheless, she succeeded in her attempt to deceive Titania, and that line of discussion came to an end.

Instead, Titania’s expression suddenly turned serious.

“There’s another thing we need to worry about, actually. It concerns the Mazoku.”

“Yeah, now that you mention it, that’s right. What were the Mazoku doing in a place like this anyway?”

“Mazoku, huh...”

“Yes.”

Titania nodded.

Just as Mizuki had pointed out, this had been troubling her from the very

moment that the Mazoku had first appeared and attacked them. Now that the Mazoku had been taken care of and things had calmed down, they finally had the luxury of time to consider the issue.

This was likely the first time this topic had been raised.

Thinking back to the Mazoku they had just fought against, Mizuki looked uneasy. Reiji proceeded to speak again, answering the question that he himself had posed.

"The Mazoku have already invaded Nelferia, haven't they?"

"I-is that really it?"

"Mm. If you think about it, that seems to be the eventuality with the highest likelihood, no? The presence of the Mazoku here would seem to suggest this."

As Reiji voiced his conjecture, Mizuki's face froze.

That was only natural. She still wasn't used to battle yet, and was now confronted with the possibility that battle with the Mazoku would again occur in the near future. The Mazoku were on an entirely different level from monsters and magical beasts after all.

Mizuki's magic had already shown itself capable of destroying monsters. When it came to the Mazoku however, it was possible that she wouldn't even be able to burn them. That last Mazoku had been just such an example.

So of course she felt uneasy.

However, Titania rejected that hypothesis.

"—No. At least for now, I can't say that the likelihood of that having

happened is all that high.”

“What makes you say that, Tia?”

“Well, as you’ve said, Reiji-sama, we are now within the borders of the Empire. Running into the Mazoku here would certainly give rise to the thoughts you have just expressed. However, in reality, the Mazoku haven’t done much after attacking Noshias. In order to get here, they would have had to first pass through two other countries and a mountain range. A reckless march like that is completely unprecedented.”

Mizuki agreed with Titania.

“That’s right. Even if they forced their army to march all the way here, it’d just mean they were cut off from the others, anyway.”

“Considering that they didn’t attack the other two countries while coming in this far, if they wanted to attacked Mehter... Well, that should be impossible, right?”

“Correct.”

Titania nodded. Just as she’d said, a large-scale troop movement of this nature which completely isolated itself was simply inviting disaster. Typically, when mobilizing a large number of troops, care would first be taken to ensure the existence of supply lines and an open path for reinforcements, and only then would action be taken.

Taking action without ensuring that these logistical requirements had been met would only result in your army being stranded. Being cut off from all assistance in this manner would eventually result in being surrounded by your enemies. This style of battle was extremely hazardous but not advantageous.

And yet.

"And yet, it is undeniable that the Mazoku are here. Even if the Mazoku army itself hasn't been able to penetrate this far, it is nevertheless an indisputable fact that the Mazoku are here."

"That's true. That's a real problem, isn't it..."

"Spies... Any possibility they're spies?"

"Spies...?"

"They're, um, what we call secret agents in our world."

"Oh, I see. But—"

"Yeah, I don't think that's it either."

Reiji's answer, given before Tia could finish, left Mizuki confused.

"Why?"

"If they were involved in that sort of task, they wouldn't have ambushed us. If they were spies, they would likely be charged with covert ops around the periphery. Abandoning their mission just to ambush us doesn't make any sense."

"Right. Especially since they were isolated here in small numbers, there was no guarantee they'd actually be able to kill us."

"Yeah. It's conceivable that they would have attacked us if they had known that this was the Hero's party, but it didn't look like they knew."

Indeed, the battle just now had been perfectly timed. That it had been a trap was undeniable. If the plan had truly been intended to take down the Hero, then their numbers had been far too few. For that reason, it was highly unlikely they were aware of his identity as the Hero.

"But if that's true, then I don't get it," Titania mumbled to herself, her brow furrowed as she tried to puzzle out the conundrum before them. Reiji turned to the middle-aged knight, "What do you think, Gregory-san?"

In response to his question, these seasoned veteran bowed his head in apology.

"...I'm very sorry, but try as I might, I can't understand how the Mazoku think."

"Is there anything that stands out to you? Any detail, large or small, would help."

"...Yuusha-dono. Rather, I think it more important that we first leave this place."

Gregory, who had not offered a concrete opinion until this point, suddenly seriously suggested they retreat.

Did something prompt that thought?

"—Is that because there are other Mazoku in the area?"

"N-no. I don't think so..."

"...?"

Looks like that wasn't it.

Reiji frowned.

Something seems off.

Gregory, having just denied that there were Mazoku in the area, nevertheless seemed pressed for some reason. Reiji had originally

thought that he'd made the suggestion after having sensed danger. Seeing as that wasn't the case, however, just what had prompted that reaction from him? If there were no Mazoku here, then why was it so important that they leave with such haste?

Titania spoke next.

"Gregory. Even though I agree with the need to move somewhere safe, but our priority is still to thoroughly understand what the Mazoku were trying to do here. Acting without careful consideration is even more likely to create dangerous circumstances."

"...As you say, Your Highness."

Gregory straightforwardly bowed his head in acknowledgment.

It looked like he'd accepted the matter. Nevertheless, Reiji couldn't shake the feeling that he'd heard something in the man's words, a trace of impatience and anxiety there. Just what was causing it...

"...Tia. Is it possible that there are Mazoku outside of those from the north?" Reiji asked, again exploring other avenues of consideration.

If there were other Mazoku, separate from those in the north, then it wouldn't be impossible to imagine that they'd found their way here.

"No. I don't think that likely. With the power of the heroes previously summoned, the Mazoku of this world were forced into the north. There shouldn't be any anywhere else... If the legends that have been passed down are correct, that is."

"Legends?"

"The record describing the past efforts of heroes mentions it. After the

Hero defeated the Maou, the forces of each nation seized the opportunity to annihilate the Mazoku. The remaining Mazoku were forced deep into the harsh environment of the far north... That very last piece of land proved resistant to human attack, and at long last, humanity gave up on the goal of hunting the Mazoku to extinction."

"I see..."

If that was true, then it was indeed impossible for the Mazoku to exist elsewhere.

But in that case.

"There are so many things that don't make sense."

"Yeah."

Reiji echoed Mizuki's exasperated murmur. Their discussion had proved fruitless, and they were left without so much as a clue.

At that moment, they heard the sound of someone running toward them from far off.

And then.

"Y-Yuusha-sama!"

In order to make their group aware of his presence, a voice called out. The voice's owner was a young knight assigned with the same task as Gregory: providing support for Reiji who had yet to accustom himself to the ways of their world.

In order to maintain contact with the palace, members of the party would at times leave the group, undertaking the responsibility of playing messenger. This time, it seemed to have been his turn, substituting

Gregory who had done it before...

The young knight dismounted from his horse before bowing.

"Rofrey-san."

"I have returned."

"Rofrey, you're not hurt, are you?"

Titania's casual question took Rofrey by surprise, and he stammered, "A-a knight like me made the Princess worry—"

"Rofrey."

"Y-yes! Sorry, but before that, over there was..."

Gregory cleared his throat, sending the younger knight into a panic, after which he finally managed to recover from his state of incoherent rambling.

Reiji answered the young man's frantic gaze.

"Oh, you saw it. The Mazoku attacked just a while ago, so we eliminated them."

"That was all of them?!"

"That" was referencing the corpses of the Mazoku who had fallen in the battle, which it seemed Rofrey had seen, judging by his startled outburst. Even though he'd already seen it, he was still making a big fuss about it. Definitely a truly expressive person.

"Y-yeah."

"As expected of Reiji-sama! ...Oh, sorry. My apologies."

...He'd practically been shouting. Would it be better to describe him as a

lively person or someone who wore his emotions on his sleeve?

Either way, looking at him, it was clear there was something he wanted to say.

"What's the matter? You've been making a huge fuss ever since you got here. And where's Luke? You two left together to meet up with the communications personnel. Why hasn't he returned?" Gregory inquired.

"Sir. I'll now make my report, which includes the aforementioned item."

Rofrey took a deep breath and then continued.

"Although this is a bit sudden, but we need to leave this area immediately."

"And why is that?"

"The Mazoku general seems to have already broken through the countries of Thoria and Shardock and is even now at the northern border of Aster."

His face stiff, Rofrey gave this stunning report. Thoria and Shardock were countries to the north of Nelferia and Sadias...

"What!? Are you serious, Rofrey?!"

"Y-yes. That is what I was told by the communications officer anyway..."

Rofrey shrank, intimidated by the pressure he felt from Titania as the young lady pressed him for information.

However, Reiji heard something in his words that bothered him.

"Rofrey-san. Just now you said, 'seems to have'. What do you mean by that?"

Reiji pursued the matter further. From the very beginning, Rofrey's words

had been permeated by a certain air of vagueness.

Had the Mazoku made their way into Aster or not? From his words, you couldn't be sure.

"Well, that's because this is according to intel provided by the troops patrolling the border. They chanced upon traces of something and came to this conclusion. That's why I can't be sure..."

"Traces of what?"

"Footprints and remnants of magical power that don't belong to any monster."

Titania stepped in next.

"So no one's actually seen the Mazoku general, correct?"

"That's correct. The enemy seems to be taking care to hide its movements. There have not been any witnesses or reports of anything having come under attack."

Hesitantly, Mizuki expressed her thoughts on the issue.

"...From what we know of them, shouldn't they be rampaging?"

Everyone nodded. It was just as Mizuki had said. As enemies of humanity, if they had truly mobilized their troops to the point of having broken through national boundaries to reach this point, then the purpose of this sneak attack had likely been to create chaos.

Although it wasn't for certain that there weren't any other ulterior motives to the attack, but if even the enemy general had been called to arms, then other possibilities seemed unlikely. The most effective use of large numbers of troops was to fight a war, after all.

And yet.

"The Mazoku have not as of yet made an actual large-scale offensive against this country, nor has the existence of their army actually even been confirmed yet. The reliability of this intel is quite questionable..."

"Perhaps the Mazoku who attacked us were the ones in question?"

When Rofrey had become aware of the attack by the Mazoku just earlier, he had combined this knowledge with the intel he'd been carrying to reach this hypothesis. To be more specific, the Mazoku who had just attacked were a part of the enemy general's forces.

That being the case, his shock when running across the Mazoku corpses just earlier was entirely understandable.

"Yes, that's what I think as well," Rofrey replied, somewhat unhappily.

"So where's Luke?" Gregory interrupted.

"He's escorting the communication officer to the rendezvous point, and then back to Mehter. If all goes according to plan, he will meet back up with us in Empire territory two days from now."

"I understand."

"Things have taken a turn for the worst," Titania said, looking thoroughly stressed.

"If that's the case, then our actions should already have been exposed to the Mazoku. Anyway, according to what just happened..."

Indeed, their question from earlier had now been answered. The ambush just now was not a coincidence, but something that had been planned in advance.

In that case, how to explain the current situation?

“Is it perhaps that the Mazoku are aware of the Hero summoning but are not familiar with the details? That would make sense if we interpret the earlier attack as a sort of forced reconnaissance.”

“Ah...”

“That makes sense. In other words, they’re trying to locate the Hero’s party.”

“Right.”

That’s right.

If the Mazoku general’s presence had become known, then it was possible that the Hero would retreat. In order to avoid this, he had acted in secret and split his troops into small, exploratory raiding bands. This perfectly explained the grasp of the situation that Mizuki, Titania, and the others had.

...But still...

If that was the case, then each unit would undoubtedly have a person in charge of relaying information to the others. However, the raiding party just now clearly did not.

Looks like it’s still too early to make a final conclusion...

In any event, what was of greatest importance now was determining whether or not their current whereabouts had already been revealed.

In contrast to his own concerns, Mizuki raised another.

“If the Mazoku are in the area, then we’re in trouble. Rofrey-san’s horse aside, the others were all killed by the Mazoku...”

"Yes. The worst possible situation may have just occurred, and it might not be one we can escape. We might just have to face it head-on."

"Rofrey. How many Mazoku are there estimated to be?"

"Over a thousand, I'm afraid..."

"One thousand..."

"...That's..."

Mizuki was left speechless, as was Reiji. That was undoubtedly a number which they had not the slightest hope of defeating in a direct confrontation.

Even the Mazoku from earlier had taken a good deal of time to finish off. Were they to be surrounded by an army of a thousand, they wouldn't be able to last long at all.

Just then, Suimei's words once again echoed in his mind.

Mizuki, too, showed a pained expression.

"T-then shouldn't we leave right now?"

"No. Wandering around aimlessly is not a good idea. Other than my horse, we have none others. If we don't decide our destination in advance, and carefully plan out food and water rations, then..."

Rejecting Mizuki's panicked words, Rofrey's assertion was correct.

They all nodded. Suddenly, Titania turned to the seasoned knight at their side, who for some reason, had not offered one word of advice during this entire discussion.

"Gregory. What do you think we should do?"

“No...”

His face grim, his answer vague, Gregory’s manner had been strange ever since the topic of the Mazoku had come up.

...No, wait just a moment. What was it Gregory said before all this?

While everyone had been discussing the Mazoku, he’d looked strangely anxious the entire time—

Everyone turned to Gregory, whose attempts to hide the strange atmosphere had failed.

“Perhaps... it’s time...” he muttered weakly.

“Gregory?”

“...When it comes to what we were discussing, there’s no need to worry.”

What in the world was this?

...His face taut as he spoke, the words he uttered next became the catalyst for the first uproar that would shake their party since their journey began.

CHAPTER 21

MEETING THE ENEMY

Several days after Suimei had left the capital with the caravan.

Their journey had gone off without a hitch. They had encountered neither robbers nor monsters, and even inclement weather – which would slow their pace drastically – had not occurred. Instead, they'd simply continued along their way, staying at small villages and post stations along the road.

If there was anything to be unhappy about, it was only the small portion sizes for meals. This, however, was obviously something they had been aware of before even setting out, and so it wasn't really worth mentioning.

Soon after, they safely passed through the mountain pass that was commonly referred to as the most difficult part of the journey, and the path they were now taking was at quite steep indeed.

From what he'd heard from the merchants in the caravan, they still had about a third of their trip to go. Once they'd passed through the foothills and a large basin, they'd find themselves at their destination.

—The differences between their worlds notwithstanding, it seemed some things were the same everywhere. Adapting to sudden changes in environment was something just as difficult for the people of this world as for those of his own.

For just as the caravan had left the foothills and reached the forest at the foot of the mountain—

The forest was fairly sparse, and on a typical sunny day, the light of the

sun would easily break through the forest canopy. Today, however, there was a thick cloud cover that left them feeling morose.

The scene, a gloomy gray that stretched as far as the eye could see, impacted their mood greatly.

In this situation, where it seemed that they could be targeted at any moment, an atmosphere of danger suddenly descended.

...Lefille, walking with Suimei, suddenly spoke.

"...Suimei-kun. Have you noticed?"

"Yeah, I have."

As he'd said, he had already sensed the faint presences in their proximity.

In fact, ever since they'd left the foothills and set foot in this forest, his neck had begun to burn, an ill omen. Afterward, he'd sensed an undisguised surge of mana, as if in preparation for an upcoming battle, radiating from a magical place nearby.

Well, actually, that wasn't an entirely accurate description... Because that magical force seemed to be heading straight for them.

From this, he could tell that an unknown something, possessing a great amount of mana, was about to ambush them...

"...Hey, is this a monster? It doesn't seem like a person..." Suimei asked Lefille, while keeping a guarded eye on his flank.

Suimei's question was provoked by the waves of mana he felt emanating from the creature. From what he could feel, this was an existence far from human.

Lefille's answer came with certainty.

"No, this is no monster. It's Mazoku."

"Wha..."

Why would that name pop up here, of all places? Although it'd been a topic of conversation earlier in the journey, had there really been some connection after all?

However.

"...You were pretty certain just now. Is there really no possibility of it being something other than the Mazoku?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I know them inside and out. There's no way I would make a mistake about this."

"...Is that so?"

"...Yes."

Suimei asked again, not understanding what was running through the young girl's mind, but this time, her answer was even stiffer.

As Lefille answered, a grim look on her face, the caravan came to a sudden stop. Perhaps someone else had noticed the presence following them.

Before long, they heard the sound of footsteps, and an adventurer dressed like a warrior ran toward them. The look on his face was undeniably bitter, perhaps owing to the inauspicious circumstances.

He waved at Suimei and the others.

“Hey—”

Just as the adventurer was about to speak, Lefille nodded.

“Yeah, we’ve already noticed.”

“Oh? I-I see.”

“Yes.”

Lefille’s brief confirmation allowed the adventurer to cut short his explanation, and jump straight to the main topic.

“—Alright, that’s good. The magicians tell us we have monsters headed this way. Galeo-san’s decision is to meet them here.”

...It seemed that unlike Lefille, the others thought the approaching presences were but monsters.

Whichever they were, the truth would soon become apparent once they arrived.

Other adventurers, however, posed a question in response.

“We’re meeting the attack here?”

“Yes. Bodyguards are to participate in the battle as well. Is there a problem?”

“No, that’s fine with us, but what about the merchants?”

Just as the surprised adventurers asked, this was a concern.

As bodyguards, they, of course, had the resolve to take part in battle.

But what would happen to the merchants they had been hired to protect?

Generally speaking, in order to avoid having non-combat personnel drawn into the fight, it would be best to have them hide somewhere safe.

Although this was the appropriate thought, but in the current situation, just where in their proximity was the best place to go?

They'd left the foothills and just entered the forest. The terrain here was flat, but desolate. There wasn't anywhere nearby that would make for a good hiding spot.

Taking their current location into consideration, what should they do? In answering this question, Lefille responded with a question of her own.

"What if we seized the initiative by taking the fight to them?"

"No, that's not an option."

"Then, what about sending the merchants deeper into the forest?"

"That's no good either."

"...?"

All suggestions were shot down by the other adventurers.

As a countermeasure, Lefille's suggestion to prevent the enemy's advance by lying in wait and intercepting them early was likely the best plan for the given situation.

"...It looks like there are monsters ahead of us as well. Since there are also monsters coming from the side, it's highly likely there are more coming from behind us as well. If worst comes to worst, we'll find ourselves surrounded. In that case, rather than having the merchants move carelessly, it's best if we keep them somewhere we can keep an eye on them while we fight. ...That's our judgment," the stiff-faced adventurer replied.

So that was it. If there was nowhere to run, then they'd just have to

defend this spot. That decision was reasonable enough.

"Who will be responsible for attacking?" Lefille asked.

"Hmm? There shouldn't be a need for that...?"

"And why not? You just pointed out the possibility that we might get surrounded. If this were indeed to occur, then wouldn't we need someone to break the siege?"

"Huh? W-we don't have any plans to break through the enemy's attack or anything. As long as we defend carefully, then it's not like monsters can really do anything, right?"

"...I see."

Faced with resistance from the adventurer, Lefille didn't continue. Her willingness to give up seemed to arise out of a desire to avoid a pointless debate. Nevertheless, Suimei could tell from her tone that she was frustrated.

"Breaking the siege, is it...?"

Silently, Suimei began to play out the upcoming battle in his mind. The most effective way to break a siege would be a focused offensive concentrated on a single point. When besieged, passively focusing on defense was something your enemies wanted to happen. Regardless of how effective or ineffective it might eventually prove to be, it was nonetheless an absolute necessity.

This time, there wasn't a real need to forcibly break a "siege" per se; rather, by separating, and devoting a portion of their forces to freely attack the enemies surrounding them, they should be able to easily throw the enemy formation into disarray.

Lefille had clearly thought things through, else she wouldn't have raised the point.

...That said, even if it was the most effective plan of action, it also required a certain degree of manpower.

As the saying goes, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. If they were to attempt an attack in a situation where they couldn't even necessarily guarantee they had enough people to defend, that'd be putting the cart before the horse.

"We'll end the conversation here. I need to get back to my position. I leave the cargo in your care."

With that, the adventurer prepared to leave.

Lefille, however, called out, stopping him.

"Can I say something else?"

"...What?"

"What's coming at us from the front is still unclear, but what's coming at us from the side are definitely not monsters, but Mazoku. Please inform Galeo-san of this detail."

"Huh? W-why do you know something like that?"

"Experience. This presence doesn't belong to any monster."

Lefille's declaration elicited a doubting groan from the adventurer.

He stared at Lefille for a moment.

"...I understand. I'll let him know that that's a possibility."

The adventurer gave a faultless reply before leaving in a hurry.

Watching him leave, Suimei sighed, and mumbled to himself.

"...I didn't go with Reiji and the others precisely because I never wanted to fight the Mazoku."

Suimei thought back to the choice he'd made back in the palace. In an attempt to avoid an unreasonable, reckless war with an unknown enemy as well as to find a way to return safely home, he'd parted ways with Reiji and the others.

And yet, in the end, here he was, forced to fight them anyway.

Even if it wasn't entirely for certain that they were about to face the Mazoku, but if that was indeed the case, then the irony of the situation was simply staggering. His attempt to stave off fate's design had proven entirely fruitless. Suimei felt as though an unseen malice was directing his path.

"Something wrong?"

Had she heard his mutters?

"It's nothing. I was just hoping that this trip would go smoothly."

"Suimei-kun. When you travel, you should always be ready for danger. You won't get anywhere with a half-hearted resolve. Even more so in the world as it is of late. You would do well to remember this."

"...No matter where I go, danger just has to follow, doesn't it?"

"And we exist precisely to combat that danger, do we not?"

"That's true. That's the kind of job we accepted, after all," Suimei replied honestly.

A fearless grin appeared on the young girl's face.

A smile directed to a comrade-at-arms on the eve of battle.

Their short talk over, Lefille removed the bundle from her back and unpacked its contents with practiced ease.

Within the unfolded cloth lay a gigantic sword.

It was around a hundred eighty centimeters in length, from the tip of the blade to the bottom of the hilt. The hilt curved into a massive, triangular sword guard, which – together with the blade itself – measured around fifteen centimeters wide. It had the wide blade of a claymore combined with the length of a zweihander. It was not made in the Western fashion, the Japanese fashion, or the Chinese fashion, but in the style of this other world. Its silver-red body couldn't be seen as ostentatious, but it was nonetheless undeniably beautiful.

Lefille swung it several times with a single hand, though all he saw was the reflection of the sun peeking through the clouds as it bounced off the blade. He hadn't the slightest clue where the strength to brandish this sword came from, or how she was doing it, but on one thing he was clear – this was something she was used to.

Suddenly Lefille, for some reason or another, walked toward the side – the direction the incoming Mazoku were in.

Was that because that enormous weapon couldn't safely be wielded to its fullest extent without first placing a certain amount of distance between herself and friendlies?

However, Lefille's next action refuted this idea. Without looking back, she continued to advance in the direction of the enemy.

"H-hey, Lefille?"

“—Suimei-kun. I’m sorry, but I’m going to seize the initiative and go on the offensive.”

“Hey, don’t just leave like that... Is it really okay for you to just act on your own? Anyway, they’re still a little ways off, wouldn’t it be best for you to at least consult with Galeo-san first?”

Lefille shook her head, her eyes closed.

“No. Look around.”

As she spoke, her head turned. Suimei followed her gaze, sweeping over their surroundings.

Because of the current situation, the other members of the caravan were frantically running to and fro, busy preparing.

“...?”

“The other adventurers and bodyguards have completely devoted themselves to defense. Do you understand now?”

“Ah, yeah, I guess. We did just talk about it, after all.”

“This isn’t going to work.”

“Mm...”

Her denial seemed to say that the caravan’s decision for a countermeasure was ill-advised.

Because of this, Suimei was reminded of what she had said earlier.

“...By that, you’re referring to the need to take the fight to the Mazoku or whatever?”

“Yes,” Lefille nodded. “The Mazoku are creatures that consider plunder,

pillage, and murder to be the correct way to live. Accordingly, their desire to attack is intense beyond words. If we focus only on defense, that will only whet their appetites. If we truly plan to resist, then dedicating ourselves to defense is not an option.”

“Simply defending is inviting danger, that I fully understand. However, running straight into the enemy formation isn’t necessarily the best tactic either. Focusing only on defense is dangerous, to be sure, but going on the offensive is also dangerous, no? That said, assuming we truly are surrounded, then even though the current tactics we’re employing can be seen as appropriate, but I also recognize that it’s not the wisest choice,” Suimei said, hoping to dispel Lefille’s desire to charge off alone.

Lefille seemed stubbornly attached to the notion of seizing the initiative. The problem was that, just as the adventurer had said earlier, such a plan would only prove effective with sufficient manpower behind it.

As a person from another world, he’d never foreseen the situation arising where he’d be forced to fight the Mazoku as a guard, and thus determining the best way to allocate their limited resources was beyond his ability.

Lefille, however, firmly rejected his words.

“And so we stick to defense? You can’t even call that a plan.”

“No. No matter what, Lefille, you can’t just attack the enemy by yourself.”

Suimei wasn’t looking down on her.

That said, it was a fact that he wasn’t sure exactly how strong she really was. As a magician, he didn’t have the experience necessary to gauge how strong a swordsman really was just by outer appearance alone.

But even though he wasn't sure how strong she was, they also were not sure of the enemy's strength or numbers. Precisely owing to the fact that there remained so many unknown factors, it was unwise to be overly optimistic.

Lefille nodded, seeming to understand how Suimei felt. But—

"What you said is very true. But, and I believe I've said this already, I know them through and through. There's no way I'd fail to understand their strength, and—"

"And?"

As she spoke, a dark aura seemed to emanate from her, giving him goosebumps.

"...I'm going to kill them all. Every last one!"

—Her valiant, beautiful face was suddenly shrouded by a dark shadow which had nothing to do with the clouds. The face she showed now was the dark side of this ever-righteous swordswoman.

The eye that had not been covered by shadow suddenly burned with a crimson glow that radiated searing hatred, a murderous glare that seemed as if to pierce through the heart of an enemy that was not present.

...Again. What in the world had happened to her? Just what kind of fate did the beings known as the Mazoku share with this young woman?

"...They're that hateful?"

"Yes. They are a sin. An evil that knows only wickedness from birth until death. They mock the weak, torment the grieving, and feast upon despair. Creatures beyond any hope of salvation. And that's why they need to be

exterminated. And that's why I'll destroy them with these two hands."

"..."

The dark resolve in her words shattered any retort Suimei might have offered.

He wasn't sure when, but Suimei was reminded that he'd heard before that the Mazoku were beyond forgiveness. When they had destroyed the kingdom in the north, they had taken no captives, only lives.

"And there you have it."

"A-ah."

Suddenly, the air between them changed. Lefille, as if apologizing for the somber mood she'd wrought, revealed a brilliant smile.

"Suimei-kun, thank you. But please, don't worry about me. Just as discussed, I leave the cargo in your care. Goodbye."

In the blink of an eye, the young girl vanished into the forest depths.

Her certainty that there was no danger in her facing the enemy alone seemed born of experience.

However, at this point in time, there was no way for him to accurately evaluate whether or not her judgment had been the correct one. If she could do it, then great, and if not, then so be it. Time would tell.

...Fast.

That said, simply judging by what he could see of her movements, he felt that she would be fine. Even though the terrain was rough, the weight she carried enormous, and her speed like lightning, she seemed completely unaffected by the environment, and her movements

were steady and smooth. As long as she didn't do anything too reckless, she should be just fine.

...Before long, she vanished from sight. Watching her race toward the enemy, the others cried out, perhaps in confusion, perhaps in anger. Either way, that didn't last long.

"Incoming!" someone shouted, as the trees shook unnaturally and the presence of magic drew near.

Finally, that which had followed them for so long had revealed itself.

"Ma- Mazoku... It's the Mazoku!"

It was unclear who shouted first because this panicked cry seemingly escaped all their mouths at once.

"So you're..."

The Mazoku.

One of the reasons which had brought him to this world.

CHAPTER 22

MAZOKU, THEIR POWER

—Just as everyone was frozen in shock.

From within the forest, several vaguely humanoid figures appeared.

The wings of a bat, the horns of a goat, and a reddish, rust-colored body. These strangely diverse parts nevertheless fit together seamlessly, resulting in a hideous silhouette.

The existence of such a creature was quite the common occurrence in fantasy stories. They were the enemies of the Hero, oddly-formed creatures from the Abyss that thrust the world into chaos.

When comparing aggression, they far surpassed even the magical beasts and monsters whom were also enemies of humanity.

These beings, however, were capable of human speech and possessed highly durable bodies, traits attributed to them in all stories.

However, that aside, they were actually divided into a handful of types and tribes according to the variances between them.

...Our world never had monsters or demons. This is my first time seeing anything like this, Suimei thought to himself as he watched their enemies fly closer.

Although he'd had numerous experiences battling non-human entities back home, but this was still his first time ever encountering creatures like this, which almost seemed to have leapt straight out of a fantasy painting. Even when compared to the dragons of antiquity described in his own world, they were nothing alike. For that matter, even something like a vampire was quite a bit more human than these things. ...This was,

of course, referring to their appearance. If you were to enumerate all the discrepancies, the list would never end.

He would never guessed that in a fantasy world like this one, between demons and subhumans, he would encounter demons first.

—In any event, there was a new problem. Even though they'd now confirmed their enemy's identity to be that of the Mazoku, that answer only raised the new question of what they were doing here.

(From what that minister with the parted hair said, after the Mazoku took the north, they've been relatively quiet...)

This was something he couldn't understand. While the Mazoku might have claimed the northern nation of Noshias for themselves, there should still be at least two countries and a mountain range between their territory and here. For them to appear here of all places was extremely unnatural.

That was, of course, only assuming you were thinking normally. These creatures were not human, and it was perhaps a mistake to try and evaluate their actions through a human viewpoint. It was also entirely possible that they freely moved about as they would, and that any humans they encountered would focus solely on defending their own kingdoms only, never bothering to stop them from advancing.

Man...

If that was really the case, then this was deeply troubling.

Either way, worrying about this now was rather beside the point.

Accordingly, Suimei stopped trying to figure out why they were here. His gaze sharpened, and bloodlust filled his eyes as he stared down his enemy.

He focused on a single Mazoku before him, who had seemed to have targeted him as well.

Suddenly, it waved its arm fiercely in his direction.

The Mazoku had seized the initiative.

Was that mana or was that ether?

He saw a circular ball of energy gather in its palm, taking on a fearsome shape before flying in his direction, arrow-like, with a vigorous wave of the Mazoku's arm.

Like hell I'd get hit that easily— Suimei scoffed as he evaded the incoming attack, which whistled through the air.

The attack cratered the ground, casting up a cloud of dust as it hit, but Suimei was entirely unharmed. Though it had been as fast as an arrow, but to the eyes of a magician, it might as well have been standing still.

Simultaneous with its attack, the Mazoku's wings began to beat furiously as it flew in his direction.

Suimei raced to meet his enemy, who was swooping downward out of the air straight for him.

This threw off his enemy's visual perception.

The Mazoku touched down, only to miss its target. If he had attempted to dodge either backward or to the side, while he'd have thrown off the Mazoku's initial targeted point, it would have been able to fix its flight path mid-course. Since he had instead dashed directly toward it, however, it had been forced to slam on the brakes, and so—

Sha!

Suimei and his enemy's bodies crossed one another. The wind howling as it struck, the Mazoku swung its claws toward Suimei. Perhaps owing to the fact that it hadn't had time to properly adjust its prepared actions, its hasty attack also forced it off-balance.

Exactly what Suimei had been aiming for.

Pivoting off his left foot, he dodged the arc traced by its claws. Grabbing its arm, he took up a karate stance meant for throwing your enemy.

"Haa—"

"—!"

Suimei upped his speed yet further. Under the effects of the increased force, Suimei slammed his foe hard into the ground.

The Mazoku rolled several times. Despite all this, it didn't seem to have been injured. It immediately rose to its feet before taking off into the air once more.

It hovered in the air, its wings flapping as it cautiously maintained a certain distance from Suimei.

Having been taken down from the air once already, it was a bit apprehensive. Even if it hadn't actually really been hurt, it nevertheless hovered in place, its concentrated bloodlust nearly tangible as it spoke in a coarse voice.

"Accursed human, using that kind of strange technique..."

"Calling it 'strange' sure is rude. It just takes a bit of skill is all."

"Hmph..."

Suimei kept his guard up even as he mocked his enemy. The Mazoku

snorted contemptuously in response, its tone angry.

However, or rather, what Suimei really wanted to say was—

“So you guys can speak, huh?” he said, straightforwardly saying what was on his mind.

The Mazoku simply snorted once more.

“—Hmph. Pitiful humans. You actually think that the ability to speak is something only you possess?”

“When it comes to human languages anyway.”

Suimei’s answer was delivered without any anxiety whatsoever.

“You really think language is something only humans have? You humans sure are stupid.”

“...‘something only humans have’? Not at all. If it’s your language...”

“Quit your jabbering.”

From its answer, Suimei could tell it had misunderstood and frowned. It looked like conversation would be impossible from here on out. Having spoken its piece, the Mazoku closed its mouth, radiating bloodlust.

“Hmm.”

Faced with this monster pressuring him, Suimei, weary of it all, simply gazed it at indifferently.

Its claws, so disturbingly like the mouthparts of an insect, began to twitch restlessly, giving rise to an instinctual feeling of revulsion. The conversation was over.

...The Mazoku had stopped talking, but that didn’t mean it had started to

attack either. The attack it had suffered earlier had it on guard, and it watched his every movement, waiting for an opening.

So it's watching me... In that case...

Suimei, too, kept an eye on his opponent as he felt out for the presences around him.

The merchants appeared to have hidden themselves already as they were nowhere to be seen. The others were already engaged in combat with the Mazoku, and from the caravan ahead, he heard the others roaring, surges of magical power, and the dangerous sound of things being smashed.

It seemed the Mazoku had focused on the area where the bodyguards had gathered.

From within the depths of the forest behind him, he could feel far more magical presences than had appeared before the caravan. Lefille must have engaged them already. By holding the majority of their forces herself, she'd greatly lessened the pressure on the caravan itself and diminished losses greatly. In this sense, her actions had been a most effective countermeasure.

...As he contemplated the situation, Suimei stuck his hand into his pocket, his eyes never leaving the Mazoku across from him. Suddenly, its wings opened wide.

I guess it's about time to act.

"Die..."

"Take this!"

—Snap!

As Suimei's fingers made this sound, the ground under the Mazoku – about to fly straight for him – suddenly exploded.

“Wha—!”

The sound of an explosion filled the air.

But that was just a smokescreen.

The magic invoked by the snap of his fingers obstructed his enemy from continuing forward.

At that moment, Suimei leapt backward to create some distance.

Exhaling, he activated another magic.

“...Now then, let's see just how strong these enemies of this world's humans are.”

With a low mutter, Suimei gathered the requisite mana.

With a sideways glance, Suimei pictured in his mind the numbers and corresponding equivalence relation of his magic array, and spoke to activate his prepared magic.

—This was the Kabbalah's most prized technique, the Sefirah.

“—Flamma est lego. Vis wizard...” (By this magician's will, flame, converge.)

From the scattered magic arrays that appeared in the air, a raging flame burst forth.

The flames soared toward the Mazoku, as if attracted to it.

The Mazoku, however, didn't move. It allowed itself to be drowned in fire.

Eh?

Seeing that his opponent hadn't bothered to so much as dodge, Suimei was taken aback. Was it that his enemy was stupid or that it had a way to deal with his attack?

As his spell continued to wreath the Mazoku in flame, Suimei pondered what kind of countermeasure his enemy might have prepared.

This was magical fire, a blaze that would never be extinguished until it had disintegrated its target... Or at least, that's what was supposed to happen. Instead, peering into the fire's depths, he saw his enemy's carefree figure, completely unharmed.

At long last, disturbed by some force or another, the flame was blown away.

"...No use, huh?"

The remnants of the inferno fading from its body, the Mazoku, perhaps responding to Suimei's mumbled words, spoke in a stunned tone.

"...You seriously thought you could defeat me with a pitiful magic like that? I've been seriously underestimated here."

"..."

...The magic just now had been too weak, huh. The Mazoku's body showed no signs of having been burned.

Even though his enemy seemed to think that he had been looking down on it, the truth was Suimei really hadn't been all that stingy with either mana or spell technique. Nevertheless, the Mazoku standing before him didn't look to have so much as been singed.

He'd originally thought to decide the battle with a single spell. Indeed, he

looked to have severely underestimated his opponent. He'd used a spell in accordance with what he judged the enemy's ability to resist to be based on the amount of mana he sensed within the its body. The effected result, however, had been entirely outside of his expectations.

Once more, the Mazoku extended an arm, gathering power.

This time, however, it didn't bother with arm motions. The lump of power shot forward on its own.

His foe seemed intent on a long-range battle. Suimei casually dodged with room to spare. Power gathered once more on the Mazoku's hand.

Thereafter, as though a solo marksman, arrows of energy flew at Suimei one after another.

Suimei raced around, evading each attack, taking care never to get too close to the wagon carrying the caravan's cargo.

Trying to suppress me with sheer numbers, is it...?

As Suimei ran, he observed his foe's facial expression, which began to grow ever more anxious.

Any normal person would already have been done in. It seemed he was more of a troublesome foe than the Mazoku had expected.

Anyway, if his opponent wanted a long-range battle, then that was rather advantageous for Suimei as well. Trading blows from a certain distance was an ideal situation for a magician.

Hounded by transparent arrows of energy, Suimei constructed another magic.

—Since last time's magic had failed, he would use an even more powerful

offensive spell.

“—Flamma est lego. Vis wizard hex agon aestua sursum!” (By this magician’s will, flame, converge. Raging flame, give form to its death throes!)

The scene from earlier repeated itself as numerous magic circles appeared once more. This time, however, they weren’t solely to be found in the air, but were rather also on the ground, and all over their surroundings. Moreover, there were at least fifty percent more appearing than had previously. Their destructive might was also incomparably greater.

Fire poured forth once more, both raining down from the sky and surging up from the ground, swallowing the arrows of energy whole as it screamed toward its target.

“Sh...”

The fire this time unsettled the Mazoku. It started to dodge, but it was too late. Its delayed movements were meaningless in the face of the approaching flames.

The brilliant flames seized upon their target.

However.

“...How weak! These flames!”

“...!”

Fiery lines drew a whirlpool of flame encircling about the Mazoku, caught in the eye of the storm. Noticing that the flames were again unable to cause it harm, it ceased its attempts to evade, instead opening its mouth to speak.

Ignoring the searing flames, it waved its arm in Suimei's direction.

"I've had it with you!"

An enormous mass of power came flying his way, consuming the remnants of Suimei's spell and turning the trees behind Suimei to dust as it approached.

Nevertheless, an attack of that level was something that Suimei could avoid with ease. He took a firm leap backward.

In the next instant, a cloud of dust, thrown up by the attack, crashed into his person.

Suimei held up a hand to protect his face as his mind raced.

Even that attack didn't do anything...

The enemy before him, a Mazoku.

What was it about it that rendered his magic so ineffective?

Looking it over, he couldn't find anything that would grant it such a resistance. That his magic would be utterly impotent was hard to believe.

...Its mana levels aren't anywhere near enough to resist the magic I've been using, but it doesn't look like it's an innate, physical resistance either..

His enemy definitely did not have the ability to weaken his magic enough to extinguish it, nor should the Mazoku be in possession of a body with a magical resistance of such a degree either. Even if its body was extremely durable, but from the sensation he'd felt when he'd sent it crashing into the ground, it wasn't at a level that surpassed other lifeforms.

It was conceivable that it had innate resistance to fire, but for it to be to

the extent that it hadn't been so much as singed by his flames was not.

If he were to assume that it was not a resistance to fire, but rather the ability to extinguish its flames, then several possibilities existed.

That was because fire created by magic was quite different from the naturally occurring phenomenon.

The flames called forth by magic were unlike the naturally occurring phenomenon, which would only occur when the conditions of a fuel source and sufficient oxygen were met. Instead, it operated via the medium of a reconstructed mystery, essentially forcibly inducing the combustion phenomenon. Aside from ignition conditions, magical fire would simply burn along the path outlined by the spell.

Subsequently, unless you countered the magic process directly, the flame would never go out until its target had been completely consumed.

Of course, if it was a simple spell on the level of a firestarter, then that was a different matter, but it should go without saying that the type of magic Suimei had just invoked was of the other type.

So why was it that the fire brought about by his magic wasn't working?

...He was thoroughly confused by this matter, but he nevertheless focused on his surroundings for the time being.

Battle was still ongoing all over, but there were no signs of having lost any ground to the Mazoku. This was because the attacking Mazoku were far outnumbered by those guarding the caravan.

The other escorts don't seem to be having any problems. In that case, let's try this...

Then, in that case...

Shik!

Suimei evaded the slash of his enemy's claws. Continuously he dodged as the Mazoku continued to chain its strikes.

"In that case, there's another reason why it's not working—"

"You just don't shut up, do you..."

"—Your clinginess is really getting on my nerves!"

"Hah!"

Suimei roared as he snapped his fingers.

Even though the Mazoku was subjected to his attack from close range, it was essentially unharmed. Nevertheless, he'd accomplished his goal of sending it flying.

"...You brat. Using the same magic over and over like an idiot!"

"Sorry. I don't have that many magics on hand, after all."

"Uaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—!"

The Mazoku snarled, its figure growing hazy. Reacting purely on instinct, Suimei threw out an arm.

"Primum excipio!" (First bulwark, local activation!)

To prevent the charge of the Mazoku, accelerating nonstop toward him, Suimei activated this physical defensive magic.

As if the magic array had been granted a power of some kind, at the moment of contact, a shrill noise accompanied flying sparks.

"W-what—?!"

A thoroughly shocked expression appeared on the face of the Mazoku, seeing this defensive spell for the first time. Suimei took the opportunity to consider the strange feeling of disharmony that filled him.

...What in the world? My magic was clearly ineffective earlier, and yet the golden fortress completely stopped its attack?

If his opponent had an ability that would directly affect magic itself, then his defensive magic should have been disrupted just now. Even if it wasn't able to completely shatter his defense in an instant, the subsequent shock should have broken through.

However, that had most definitely not happened. Its attack had been rendered entirely impotent. Consequently, an endless tide of questions streamed through Suimei's mind.

"W-what just happened?! How could I be stopped by that thing?!"

"Ha, isn't it obvious?!"

"Impertinent brat—"

—The Mazoku, coming to the realization that attacking wasn't working, and concerned about a counterattack, placed some distance between them.

As Suimei frowned, the sound of an explosion came from not far off. Keeping the Mazoku in his peripheral vision, he turned in the direction the sound had come from. There, a caravan escort had destroyed another Mazoku with an explosive magic.

A fire magic.

And yet, unlike when he had done so, the Mazoku was scorched by the

flames, and drew its last breath.

“That guy...”

What the heck?

Even though his magical flames had been entirely ineffective, it was nevertheless now evident that the Mazoku did not possess any sort of exceptional, innate resistance to flame.

Suddenly, as Suimei was evaluating the situation, a male voice suddenly called out.

“Hey! What are you doing?! Get back!”

“Hmm?”

“You! The guy with the black hair! Pull back!”

Enemy defeated, he’d noticed Suimei’s situation.

The other adventurers, their Mazoku eliminated, rushed over.

Looking more closely, he recognized them as the party that Lefille had happily conversed with.

As directed by the warrior adventurer, a girl – the party’s mage – chanted as fire sprang forth from the end of her staff.

Perhaps having noticed, the Mazoku suddenly flew backward with a flap of its wings.

So that magic is one to be avoided...

Sensing the danger, it pulled back. Although it had previously tried to avoid one of his spells, but this time it really retreated a good distance, perhaps owing to the difference between his magic and hers when it came

to effectiveness was against the Mazoku.

Next.

The adventurer who had raced to his side spoke.

"Get back. We'll take care of things."

"No, it's okay. I can do it."

"What do you mean you 'can do it'...?! You were clearly in a desperate situation!"

"Desperate? No, not at all..."

"What else would you call it?! That Mazoku is as healthy as can be!"

Well, on the surface of things, that was undeniable. But that just meant it'd take a little more time is all. That Mazoku posed no threat to him whatsoever, not to mention he hadn't yet used his true strength.

All the same, since he'd been unable to bring his foe down, from an outsider's point of view, he was indeed locked in a desperate battle.

"...Maybe, but either way, I still want to continue."

"No way. Retreat back to the caravan, we'll take care of this."

"Eh? No, no, that's a problem!" Suimei rejected the adventurer's words with a shake of his head.

Indeed, it would be troubling for Suimei. If he were to simply leave this in someone else's hands, then he'd never be able to unravel the enigma of why his magic was so ineffective against the Mazoku. He would leave without knowing precisely just how much power it took to take down his enemy. Considering that he wasn't in any danger, he couldn't just allow the mystery to remain unsolved.

And yet.

“Huh? What problem are you talking about? Once we take that thing down, there won’t be any problems left, right? Now then, hurry back to the caravan—?!”

Not entirely paying attention as he spoke, the adventurer’s words suddenly stopped short.

That was due to having to avoid something that flew his way – the Mazoku’s attack.

The adventurer at Suimei’s side didn’t seem to have thoroughly grasped the attack, as he unnecessarily leapt a great distance away.

Realizing that its attack had been avoided sight unseen, the Mazoku circled around horizontally, as if gliding, while drawing close.

It attempted to flank them in order to attack from a blind spot.

“Shit, it’s already here!”

Gripping his sword, the adventurer advanced a step, seemingly intending to protect Suimei, something that he should feel grateful for.

However, both feelings of gratitude and nervousness vanished before Suimei’s next incantation.

“—Astrum micans profundum. Cupio csuspento is ut vomica!” (—Sea of stars, transform the Blessed Mother’s words into a curse!) [TN: The author completely butchered the Latin on this one. I mean, they usually only barely make sense, but this time, he included both a term that doesn’t exist – “csuspento” – as well as one that makes no sense in the context it’s used in – “vomica”. If anyone knows how to fix this

incantation, I'd very much appreciate some suggestions.]

Below Suimei, a magic circle the color of dayflowers appeared. In order to quicken the construction of the magic, within the palm of his right hand, he constructed a "refined spell archetype".

"Ha! Have you still not realized that your magic is useless?!"

He definitely understood. However, magicians were the kind of being that would endlessly pursue every hypothesis until each and every one had been disproven. As long as possibilities still continued to exist, they would never give up.

"—Stella maris!" (Go! Cursed, frozen star!)

—Cursed Stella Maris.

As he released the magic sphere in his hand, several bluish magic arrays manifested before him, the refined magic releasing its power.

Acceleration, acceleration, amplification, and then refinement.

Hail with a vapor trail. Comet-like bullets of magic. Taking into the air, these frozen stars plummeted toward the Mazoku.

"Ice?! —Wha?!"

The Mazoku raised its altitude and escaped backward.

As the magic comets impacted the ground, massive icicles surged upward like blooming flowers. The icy moisture created by the icicles instantly froze the Mazoku's torso, even in the air as it was.

"...Tch. Its a lot weaker. I guess that's the best I can hope for without either Spica or Sirius in the sky..."

It was the same as when he'd enacted his Meteor magic. As expected,

magic that relied on the constellations was difficult to wield in this other world, seeing as neither they nor the stars of his world appeared in these skies.

Unable to draw on the power of the stars, the magic's might had weakened considerably.

"Hehe, you're too naive, human! If you think ice is going to— W-wha?!"

"Heh. Sorry to disappoint, but this is a different type of magic from the ones I used before. I don't think you'll find it that easy to break free."

"Something of this level – shit! Why can't I break this brittle ice?!"

Trying to escape its prison, the Mazoku pounded on the icicle with great strength, though it didn't so much as shudder.

—Cursed ice.

A frozen phenomenon recreated by the Sefirah of the Kabbalah. Astrology had been used to further strengthen its effect, and a curse had been interspersed throughout. An icy magic of the water element, the product of three separate magic systems interwoven with one another.

In addition to the frozen shards it created, it would also follow the trails left by the moisture it summoned, imprisoning its target in an mysterious, frozen barrier.

Adding in the fact that it also carried a curse, this was a most vicious magic. With the added effect of the curse, simply breaking the ice itself was insufficient to escape its grasp. Yes, this was cursed ice. As long as you did not destroy the curse itself, the ice would never melt, nor would it ever shatter.

Finally, something worked... Suimei thought to himself as he watched his enemy.

Actually, it would have been far stranger for it to not have worked. Despite the fact that he was extremely surprised to see that the Mazoku had not itself been frozen, he had nevertheless expected as much when he had enacted this spell.

Even if the Mazoku possessed some sort of abnormal magic immunity, even if the power of his spell, unable to resonate with the stars, had weakened, this was still a two-layered ice magic. Escaping this frozen prison would prove unnaturally arduous.

...The adventurer suddenly patted Suimei on the shoulder.

“What’s this? So you can use two elements! That’s pretty impressive!”

“Well, something of this level...”

“Don’t be modest. I’m really seeing you in a new light here!”

“Eh, no...”

That really wasn’t anything special. Suimei was left in a strange mood. The adventurer called out to his companions—

“Alright! Let’s do it now! It can’t move, so let’s give it all we’ve got!”

Suddenly.

“—□□□□□□!”

The Mazoku roared at the heavens.

The howl of a cornered beast.

A piercing cry. Just like that, the Mazoku gave voice to its hatred, the

sound ringing in the ears of all those around.

At the same time, its mana levels started to soar, it having seemingly drawn on every last one of its hidden reserves. This caused a dark, dense, foul cloud of power to gather around its body.

What? Mana? N-no, this is—

While Suimei tried to put his finger on the familiar air of dark energy that had begun to overflow, the adventurer called out loudly.

“C-crap! The ice is going to break!”

“Hmm?”

Suimei interrupted his train of thought and turned to the adventurer. The adventurer seemed afraid of the power the Mazoku was now displaying. The joyous expression formerly adorning his face had turned anxious once again.

Suimei, on the other hand, was as calm as ever.

“Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why’? That’s the power of a Mazoku when it’s serious, you know?! It’s going to break that ice with ease!”

“Well, no, that’s not going to happen. It doesn’t matter how much struggles, it’s not going to be able to break those icicles,” Suimei replied calmly.

“Not going to break you say? What kind of leisurely things are you saying?! Look!”

“ ‘Look’...?”

His gaze followed the direction the adventurer’s finger pointed in.

There was the Mazoku, the same as before. What was, however, drastically different were the deep cracks running through the cursed ice binding it.

"Huh...? Wait, oi oi oi! You've gotta be kidding me?! That's a curse! A hex! How can it possibly break like that?!"

"Why are you only surprised now?"

"Nonononono, how could anyone remain calm after seeing that?!"

Suimei was practically screaming, the scene unveiling itself before his eyes had so blown away any notion of common sense. He continued to watch.

What the hell is going on? The cursed ice is really breaking... This is insane.

—The type of magic known as hexes weren't simply curses. Hexes were a specific technique belonging to the curse system of modern magic. Briefly described, they did not use feelings of resentment as a foundation, but were rather entirely artificial, manufactured from beginning to end.

Different from the terrifying destructive power or powerful bindings that were born of deep feelings of resentment, hexes were able to directly reproduce the effects of these spells without the underlying requirement of these negative feelings. Dispelling a hex required directly targeting the technique itself, which required a thorough understanding of such things in addition to a fair amount of skill.

Anyway, that was why what was happening now was simply unbelievable. A curse originally wasn't something that manifested physically the way other magic did. For it to be destroyed in this manner was like a certain

famous monk who'd subdued a painting of a tiger.

"S-shit! Everyone, take him down, NOW!" the adventurer beside Suimei shouted, as Suimei frowned worriedly.

Sounds of acknowledgment echoed from all around.

The other adventurers traded glances and nodded before proceeding to take action. Unfortunately, the torrent of black energy pouring forth from the Mazoku sent them all flying.

"D-dammit! Don't get too close!"

"Use magic! Kill it with magic!"

"—O flame! Become a spear and pierce my foe!"

As commanded, the magicians began to chant.

It wasn't well thought out, though. Judging by what had happened earlier, if it was just the Mazoku they were dealing with, then perhaps their magic would have been sufficient to break through its defenses. This time, however, the Mazoku was surrounded by ice.

There had never been a reason to revoke a curse in their own world, and so Suimei lacked the ability to cancel the curse and break the surrounding ice.

Consequently, the magic intended to destroy the Mazoku weakened considerably.

As their respective magics landed, what appeared before them was the sight of the Mazoku, completely unharmed.

"What's going on? How come our magic didn't work...?!"

The adventurers were deeply shaken.

At this moment, the Mazoku's power continued to surge forth as before. This tremendous power filled them with a fear they could not ignore. This was a strange power, utterly unlike the feeling that came from a magician activating their mana furnace.

That power... I've seen it somewhere before...

But no.

...It's about time for me to get serious. My hex isn't going to last long before that power.

Suimei was concerned by the Mazoku's power. Even though that strange power bothered him, he didn't have the luxury of thinking about it now.

Indeed, the cracks running through the icicle were already steadily growing larger. Paying the price for this action, blood dripped from all over its body, its veins bursting due to the exertion. Nevertheless, if things were to continue down this path, it would break through its prison before it died, after which it would come straight for him.

He needed to destroy it before that could happen.

"—*Flamme est lego. Vis wizard...*" (By this magician's will, flame, converge.)

"That spell again?! It hasn't worked from the very beginning!"

"—Really? Although it's the same spell as before, but I'm using all my power this time; you can't just say it'll turn out the same!"

"You really think you're going to burn me with a piddling warmth of this degree?!"

"You sure are full of yourself, aren't you, you phony demon! Don't you

dare look down on a magician's flames!" Suimei yelled before beginning his next incantation.

"Hex agon aestua sursum. Impedimuntum mors!" (Raging flame, give form to its death throes! Grant death unto the one obstructing my path!) Fire gathered. This time, however, it did not form itself into whips of flame lashing toward the Mazoku. Instead it became a whirling eddy of flame swirling around its target.

Everything caught in its path was turned to ash in an instant.

"—W-what? It's different from last time..."

The fire's light reflected off the ice, filling the backdrop of forest and sky with a blinding scarlet light.

At some point, a small magic circle had encircled a magic stone in Suimei's palm, which burned with a deep orange flame.

—Speaking aloud the final activation keyword, Suimei crushed the magic stone.

"—Fiamma o Ashurbanipal!" (Burn like the sun, gem of Ashurbanipal!)

In an instant, the flames surrounding the Mazoku suddenly closed in, their terrifying might drowning out all sound.

The scene was suddenly rocked by an explosion as fire fountained out of the ground and the heavens were dyed a reddish-white. An explosive roar accompanied this dramatic display.

A conflagration.

Crimson waves of heat billowed outward, spreading in all directions.

Subjected to this terrifying explosive power, the Mazoku didn't even have

time to scream its last.

None of those watching had the luxury of noting this, however, as they were too busy protecting themselves. Defending themselves against the terrifying heat shooting forth was already taking their all.

...In the end, all that remained was the smell of burnt trees and a few flickering embers.

Even though he'd carefully adjusted the strength of his spell out of concern for their surroundings, a flame of this scale and the resulting shockwave had reduced the ground the Mazoku had been standing on to lava.

"W-what an amazing magic!" an adventurer called out, stunned.

The voice belonged to the young magician girl. Her words broke the others out of their stupor, after which they mirrored her sentiment.

"O-oi! Even the clouds have been turned black...!"

"Mid-level magic? B-but this destructive power..."

"Lava...? Isn't this the stuff that comes out of volcanoes...?"

In this world, black smoke and lava weren't that commonly seen. As those around continued to voice their shock, the first adventurer approached Suimei.

"Hey, you! Looks like you can really do it if you try! If you can do something like this, then you should just do it from the start!"

"Y, yeah. It's my first time fighting the Mazoku, so I'm still getting used to things."

"Really? Is that why you were so stingy with your magic? Next time, just

go ahead and wreck the things!”

“Haa...”

That ran completely counter to what Suimei intended, though.

Suimei gave a vague reply to the smiling adventurer, resulting in a surprised question.

“What’s up? Wasn’t that the first Mazoku you’ve ever defeated? Shouldn’t you be happier?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s with that response? You should be more excited! Don’t tell me you’re tired already!”

“No, I’m fine...”

“Is that so? Well, alright then... Do take care of yourself, okay?”

“W-will do...”

“Good. It’s goodbye then.”

The warrior adventurer seemed to have misunderstood something, convinced that he was a novice to battle. He cast Suimei one last look before rejoining his companions.

Sending him off with his eyes, Suimei sighed tiredly.

“...Whatever. Forget it.”

Left in a state where he didn’t know what to say, Suimei nevertheless didn’t really mind.

Somewhat dejectedly he scratched his head, before pulling himself together and turning in the direction the Mazoku had come from.

So this is a Mazoku, huh...

This was the subordinate of the one he'd been called to this world to face.

He'd originally intended to take the opportunity to properly gauge his enemy's strength, but in the end, he'd been forced to crush it with raw power.

To be honest, it'd hadn't been difficult in the least.

While it had indeed taken him some time, but that was all. In fact, before Suimei had even had a chance to reveal his true strength, his enemy had already been turned to dust.

However—

"...Even though I used the flames of Ashurbanipal, it still took about a minute for it to die..."

He'd destroyed the Mazoku with a fire magic. Of the five great elements, this was the element that he was most proficient in. He was naturally suited to these magics, the destructive power of these spells could be easily seen, and their incantations were relatively shorter when compared to other magics.

And yet, destroying the enemy with a spell of this nature had still taken a whole minute.

That was far too time-consuming. The vast majority of things lasted but mere moments in the face of such flames. The Mazoku, however, were clearly the exception. Even a small fry like that one had proven this difficult.

Suimei's face was stiff, his consternation visible.

Suddenly, something came whistling toward him from behind.

“What—?!”

Suimei turned a moment later. What he saw was the figure of something just like what he had just seen.

A Mazoku that had been sent flying.

—More accurately, pieces of a Mazoku.

Two pieces. Three. A twisted arm, a broken leg, and a severed head flew in his direction.

What the—

Suimei stared dumbly.

Dropping to the floor around him were scattered parts of a Mazoku’s body. Following soon after was the figure of Lefille, holding her enormous sword with a single hand.

From the shade of the trees, the girl held her silver and scarlet blade aloft. The girl currently before him bore no hint of the gentle atmosphere that had accompanied her at their first meeting.

Leaning forward slightly, her eyes glittered with vermilion light. The arm holding her weapon was taut as a bowstring, her form that of a fierce god.

A strangely audible gulp resounded through the area.

The sound became a signal. Sent flying along with the pile of parts that had been its companion, the surviving Mazoku rushed toward Lefille.

An ambush. It’d intentionally targeted the moment when Lefille had stopped, thinking it likely the moment that she would reveal an opening.

This “ambush” of its, however, had simply been wishful thinking.

Lefille hadn't lowered her guard. Although she'd sent her enemy flying, she was as cautious as though it were still immediately before her.

Accordingly, she'd never left a combat-ready state.

In the face of that overpowering will, the Mazoku, struggling to the last, had no chance of victory.

Dashing toward her, Lefille slashed horizontally with her giant weapon.

She had not shown a single opening during that attack, from start to finish. The enormous blade seemingly causing a storm of wind to gust as it cut through the air.

Struck by this weapon, the Mazoku was cleanly split in two.

Immediately following, Lefille sliced again, this time vertically, from high to low. Her attack was like a whirlwind, and her twin strikes drew a cross in the air, this time parting the Mazoku's body along its vertical axis.

And so the Mazoku met its end.

The girl's movements, however, had not concluded.

Her actions now were superfluous. There was no meaning in continuing to slash a foe that had already perished.

Completely unconcerned by the fact that what she was doing now was quite literally overkill, she punctuated her kill by crushing the Mazoku's head with her sword, as if to say that she hadn't yet had her fill.

“Be crushed... devil!”

Her half-mumbled words passed through Suimei's ears, words of loathing seemingly directed at an enemy not currently present.

...The indescribable oppressive atmosphere smothering the area suddenly disappeared. Lefille lifted her sword, and walked over to rejoin the others.

"...It looks like things are done on your guys' end."

"Y-yeah. You could say that..."

The one to answer had been the adventurer from just earlier, the one from the party that was familiar with Lefille. Despite the fact that Lefille had returned to her normal self, unable to wipe the shocking memory of the ferocious vision he had just seen from his mind, his answer was delivered rather stiffly.

Suimei, acting on behalf of both himself and the adventurer, raised a question.

"And your end?"

"Ah, yeah, it's been cleaned to the point that not a one is left. There are no more Mazoku in that section of the forest."

Just as she'd declared to the crowd before racing off, she'd destroyed them utterly. That was Lefille for you.

Although Suimei...

"Weren't there more Mazoku in the forest than came out?"

"Yes. My original plan heading over was to completely clear them all out."

"Hah..."

Suimei wasn't sure what to say. Lefille revealed a fearless smile.

"You guys didn't have any problems, I trust?"

“Nope.”

His answer had been direct, and to be fair, there truly hadn't been any difficulties.

On that note, Lefille really planned on killing them all herself...

“I let some escape. I sure need more training,” she added regretfully.

Just what in the world is this girl...

Lefille slowly looked around.

“Just earlier, I had a really shocking sound from over here. Was that perhaps the cause of this scene of carnage?”

“Yep. That was a spell of mine.”

At his answer, she suddenly showed a look of surprise, though a bright expression appeared once more on her face immediately thereafter.

“As expected from you, Suimei-kun. How lively.”

“What's that supposed to mean? It took this much just to take down one of them.”

“Wait, what? Just one?”

“Yeah.”

Her confusion was likely due to the devastation that had been caused to their surroundings. Suimei nodded, prompting another stunned question from Lefille.

“...I'd planned on holding up any strong ones, but I guess one made it here?”

“No, I'm pretty sure it was the same as the others. It looked just like the

one you just chopped into pieces,” Suimei answered, casting a quick glance in the direction of the fallen Mazoku.

All the Mazoku that had attacked this area looked to be of the same type, as all bore the same resemblance to the devils of lore.

When it came to individual differences between them, however, that was another story. Either way, Suimei had never felt the slightest hint of danger from start to finish, and thus decided there hadn’t been any particularly strong individuals among their number.

“I don’t think so. Anything that would have taken this much to bring down shouldn’t just be any normal Mazoku... This is at least an intermediate level magic, if I’m not mistaken...?”

“Intermediate level?”

“Yeah. Is it not?” she asked.

...What’s qualifies as an intermediate level magic?

On that note, the magic of this world wasn’t split into the five main elements but rather eight, the distinction of which was rather unclear.

Magic was further divided into low level, intermediate level, and high level spells. When Reiji and Mizuki had learned high level spells, their escorts had been overjoyed. That memory was still vivid in his mind.

So just how are they defined?

When it came to magic, his world and this one differed wildly on both standards and specifications, and so this wasn’t a question Suimei was able to answer.

“...Sorry. I know it’s not the answer you’re looking for, but I don’t know

what else to say. To be honest, I'm not really sure."

Although Suimei's answer was apologetic, Lefille nevertheless didn't seem to be able to simply accept it.

"You're not sure? Why not? You mentioned before that your father taught you magic... Did he perhaps never mention these things?"

"Oh, that. No, it's because this is a magic I created myself."

"WHAT—?! You created that yourself?!"

"Eh? What? Something strange about that?"

Suimei cocked his head, puzzled by the flabbergasted reaction of the young woman.

Generally speaking, aside from a few basics and standard, well-known spells, his repertoire was entirely self-invented. While the constellations of astrology and their meanings were already established, thus resulting in a field that would not evolve, both magicians who practiced either the Kabbalah or hexes – very free-form magic systems – as well as high-ranked magicians frequently created magic of their own that capitalized on their specialties to achieve optimal efficiency.

"B-but... Is something like that really possible...?"

"Of course it is. As long as you have both time and knowledge, in addition to the ability to think outside the box, then it's very much possible. To be more accurate, I should say crafting personal magics is a necessity, really."

"I, I see. It sure sounds hard... being a mage."

He wasn't sure where, but Lefille seemed to have misunderstood

something, as she incessantly mumbled to herself. The mage girl, standing to the side, timidly raised her hand.

"A-about that magic. From what I saw, it didn't look any weaker than anything another mage would use, but... Well, it didn't seem that effective on the Mazoku."

"...Really?"

"Absolutely. Just where did my magic go wrong, I wonder."

When it came to this topic, Suimei could only shrug helplessly.

Seriously, what's going on here...

Though the topic came to an end without reaching a meaningful conclusion, Suimei nevertheless had a clue to follow.

In its last moments, that power that the Mazoku had shown. Suimei was certain he'd seen it somewhere.

That was a power that gave him goosebumps, a corrupt force that was somehow physiologically disagreeable.

Was that perhaps that power that the Mazoku worshiped—?

"...That reminds me. I heard before that the Mazoku worship some kind of evil god...?"

Perhaps that was it.

—Just as Suimei was looking to unravel this mystery.

Lefille suddenly called out.

"...Suimei-kun. Everyone."

"Hmm? What's up?"

“It looks like things aren’t over just yet.”

Everyone turned.

Lefille tipped her head, pointing in the direction of the caravan. The others followed her gaze. There, the presences of more Mazoku could be felt.

“No way...”

Suimei’s words echoed the sentiments of all watching.

This battle wasn’t over yet.

CHAPTER 23

THE SPIRIT'S SWORD

"It looks like things aren't over just yet."

Her gaze sharp, Lefille's comment filled the others with anxiety.

The magician girl's gaze followed the direction that Lefille had pointed in.

"L-Lefille-san is right. They're coming this way! And there's more than last time..."

"Are you serious?"

"Damn! There were people hurt in the battle just now. We don't have enough people!"

The young girl's words sent the bodyguards and adventurers into a frantic clamor.

The reality of the continuation of their battle with the Mazoku was evidenced by the presence of additional presences. Moreover, not only had some of their number been injured in the previous battle, but there were even more Mazoku than the last time. Things had taken a turn for the worse.

Given the above, that they felt shaken to their cores was only natural.

A step later, Suimei began to focus on reconnaissance. Closing his eyes in order to shut out unnecessary information, he activated his magician's sixth sense.

There's what, ten? No, about twenty. Just like they said, there's more than last time.

Just like the previous time, the presences were headed straight for them.

The strength of the presences felt roughly on par with those from the previous battle. These were likely the same kind of Mazoku—

As Suimei was staring off into the distance, the bodyguards lamented their situation bewilderedly.

“...What do we do now?”

“Do you even have to ask? We meet their attack! There’s nowhere to run, after all!”

“Listen up! Everyone hurt in the last battle, pull back! Everyone else, prepare yourself!”

Roared commands overlapped, serving only to further deepen the already disorganized atmosphere. Very soon their enemies would arrive.

They’d won fairly handily the first time around, but that was only because they far outnumbered the enemy. Now that their numbers had lessened while their enemies’ had grown, fear had them in its grip. Terror and unrest had seized a hold of this battlefield.

Galeo, who had hidden in the cargo wagon along with the other merchants until now, stepped out.

He walked into the midst of the bodyguards, who were busy with preparations.

“I-is the battle not over yet...?” Galeo asked in a shrill voice, his face ashen.

As a noncombatant, as far as he was concerned, the Mazoku were solely an object of fear. From the actions and words of the others, he seemed to have noticed the situation.

One of the escorts answered him.

"Yes. Please continue to wait, it seems there are more Mazoku headed this way."

"W-what? Are we going to be okay?!"

"...That, huh. Well, from what was said, it seems there are more than last time and we don't have the time to heal those who were wounded. Things might not go so well for us this time."

"How could this happen... Are you telling me we're going to die?!"

"No, we'll protect you with all we've got. It's just that..."

"What?"

"In a worst case scenario, our defense will collapse and some of the guards might flee."

"—!? ...I-I see. How did it come to this..."

"If it comes to down to it, before our defense collapses completely, please take the other merchants and escape."

His voice low and soft, his expression serious, and his face grave, the adventurer informed Galeo of the possibility that some of the guards might run. As he'd said, one's life was something irreplaceable.

Here solely for the money, there was definitely the possibility that some would run, prioritizing their personal safety.

If such a thing were indeed to occur, it was best to make plans for their own escape, the adventurer seemed to be saying.

Despairing, a strained look appeared on Galeo's face. He'd originally thought that this was going to be a smooth trip, that they'd reach the

empire without any difficulty. However, just before the finish line, something like this had happened.

Not only had the Mazoku suddenly appeared, but now they were attacking in an endless stream. Why they had gone to such an effort to target a small caravan and a few escorts was incomprehensible.

Thoughts raced through his mind.

As Galeo groaned in frustration, Lefille – the first to notice that a second round of battle was about to begin – walked over.

Her confident posture seemed ever so reliable.

“—Please don’t worry, Galeo-dono. I won’t leave a single one of the incoming Mazoku alive.”

He raised his head.

“I-it’s Gurakis-dono... Although your words certainly seem very confident, but against the Mazoku, a young girl like yourself...”

“It can’t be easy as you make it out to be,” he seemed to want to say, but he avoided being so direct.

From his eyes it was easy to see that in her he saw only a frail young girl, leaving him both puzzled and disbelieving.

He had not witnessed her earlier might nor was he aware of her efforts in the forest.

In light of that, he couldn’t really be blamed for his skepticism...

The adventurer who had previously spoken to Suimei took the opportunity to step forward and speak with great confidence.

“No, it’s not like that at all! Lefille is strong, you know! The Mazoku from

the battle just now were pretty much killed by her alone!”

“Yeah! And Lefille-san even has the skill to kill a half-giant with one strike! That’s why you don’t need to worry yourself too much over these Mazoku,” the magician girl said, supplementing the warrior adventurer’s words.

Compared to the other adventurers, this pair was far more collected, likely owing to their experience fighting by Lefille’s side in the past. Their words caused Galeo to stare at them and Lefille with surprise, as they were able to keep their calm in such terrifying circumstances.

“Is that really true...?”

“Absolutely. So don’t worry.”

Though it wasn’t that loud, Lefille’s assertion was nevertheless filled with confidence. Perhaps because he hadn’t felt the slightest hint of weakness in her words, Galeo finally calmed down.

When it came to this young girl, who had nearly singlehandedly defeated all the Mazoku in the battle just earlier, perhaps the Mazoku might as well have been nothing more than ants.

On that note—

“...You sure are trusted.”

The battle scene from earlier having left a deep impression on them, the warrior and magician girl watched Lefille with admiring eyes.

These words came from Suimei, who, sighing, was reacting to their worshipful expressions.

“...P-please don’t say that, Suimei-kun. I was pretty nervous myself, you

know. It isn't like how it sounds," Lefille countered, embarrassed.

"You might say that, but there was quite the expression on your face at the time, you know?"

"...O-oh."

Suimei's continued attack deepened her feelings of embarrassment. Her face reddened, making for an unbearably cute impression.

Having listened to the pair's advice, Galeo turned to Lefille.

His gaze still half-disbelieving, he coughed, and doing his best to control his feelings, spoke.

"...I understand. I look forward to seeing what you can do."

"Sure. I'll do my best to live up to your expectations," Lefille said, meeting his business-like manner with modesty.

Their conversation over, Lefille turned to Suimei.

"Suimei-kun."

"Hmm? What's up?"

What's this all of a sudden?

Her voice serious as she called out to him, Suimei turned to face Lefille.

"I apologize if I'm being a bit annoying here, but are you okay? If anything happened in that last battle, please don't force yourself. It'd be best if you pulled back with the others," she said solemnly.

She's bringing this up because my magic wasn't working on the Mazoku, huh.

Indeed, from the perspective of a magician, it was best to avoid

troublesome battles. Perhaps it would be best to leave this to the others. That was what the others seemed to be suggesting as well, after all.

However, there were too many enemies. In a situation like this where their safety couldn't be guaranteed, he wouldn't stand by and do nothing.

"No, it's fine."

"Are you sure?"

Just as Lefille asked this, the male adventurer echoed her question.

"Yeah, are you sure you're okay? You used quite a few magics back there. Are you not tired?"

"Oh, no. I'm fine. Room to spare, really."

" 'Room to spare', is it? ...Being overly confident in your abilities is a mistake with consequences that you can't take back later, you know?"

"I appreciate the warning."

Suimei's response was cold, but polite. Their words had been said out of concern for his welfare, after all, so he wouldn't directly contradict them.

He nodded his head to indicate a superficial agreement, but the adventurer met him with a doubting gaze, not entirely believing.

Lefille spoke up once more.

"But Suimei-kun, are you really okay considering that your magic doesn't seem that effective on the Mazoku?"

"Oh, that. I'll think of something."

"Do you think you can do it?"

"My magic isn't limited to what I showed just now. If a particular magic

system doesn't work, then I'll just have to make inferences from what I observe and continually try things until I find something that works," he answered, explaining the reasoning behind his confidence.

Lefille frowned, as if something he'd said was foreign to her.

"...? A 'system' that works? Not an element?"

"Oh, I see, um, how do I put this... It's complicated."

Her confused look clearly embedded itself in his vision. His answer was nevertheless rather evasive.

While the magic he had used previously had definitely demonstrated less-than-ideal results, it was nowhere near life-threatening.

Back in his world, "systems" were how they classified the various types of magic.

This was evidence that magic in their world did not arise from a single origin.

Although their world was one in which science had spread throughout society, leaving magic but a thing of myth and legend, even in such a world, there were countless examples of this mysterious thing.

In addition to astrology, the Kabbalah, and hexes, there was also witchcraft; the ever-famous alchemy; onmyoudou, a composite of various magics; Vajrayana Buddhism and its numerous sects; as well as the largest system of Far Eastern magic, senjutsu.

Just the types that were known and classified already surpassed thirty in number.

If these were further subdivided by element, sequence, effect, etc., it

would result in a staggering number of types.

Simply put, the world he was from was home to a diverse array of mysteries.

Even if you were to exclude magic systems that he was incapable of using, as well as those that he had learned but that he had not yet fulfilled the requirements for using, he would definitely be able to find something effective among those that remained.

Exorcism or holy magic, for example.

Either way, the fact that his magic was less effective than normal did not mean that it was in any way inferior to the magic of this world. Even if he failed to find a system that worked even after repeated tries, then he could simply crush his enemy with raw power as he had done earlier.

—Whether ten Mazoku or twenty, as long as he matched their number with spells of his own, there would be no problem.

If there was anything at all that he was concerned about, then it was that he might have to reveal what he was truly capable of in order to deal with the enemy.

If it did come to that, however, his preference to keep things secret would have to fall second to the safety of the group.

Although it's a last resort, but if worst comes to worst, I'm going to have to activate my mana furnace.

If the danger they faced were bad enough, he'd have to exert himself to the utmost. Were he to miserly hold back his power, and were they to be forced into a crisis as a result, then all that would await him would be regret.

That was not a mistake he could afford to make.

Amid this train of thought.

"Just like earlier, you sure are calm, Suimei-kun. Generally speaking, people would be just as frantic as the other guards in this kind of situation."

"Didn't those two just say that there was no need to worry?"

Suimei's mouth twitched at her words.

"You're different from them. I don't feel any hint of unease at all from you."

"I don't know, maybe I'm just putting on a brave front?"

"Again with the shameless deception."

It seemed like Lefille was not fond of his evasive answers. Recognizing this, he answered seriously.

"—Let me put it this way then: I have no intentions of losing my calm."

"Does that mean you've encountered crises like this before?"

"More or less. Even though I look like this, I have a lot of experience surviving life-and-death battles."

"Like what?"

"That's a secret."

Even though his evasive answer was slightly disappointing, Lefille nevertheless continued brightly, "You sure are a strange person. You're a pleasure to speak with most of the time, but you're completely unwilling to reveal any of your secrets."

“That’s what it means to be a magician.”

“If you keep it up, I’m going to pull off that mask of yours sooner or later.”

“—Oh? And how do you plan to do that?”

“Haha. I’ve always done things the same way – with my sword.”

“God forbid... You sure are scary, Lefille-san.”

Suimei met Lefille’s humorous, if audacious, words with his own. As the two joked with one another, Galeo, worried, interrupted.

“...Gurakis-dono. Do you not need to prepare?”

“Yeah, I’m ready to go. As long as I have this sword with me, I’m good.”

“Yakagi-dono, I agreed to take you along because you’re proficient with healing magic. Please don’t push yourself.”

Suimei scratched his head awkwardly in response to Galeo’s concern.

“I appreciate your concern, but don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

“But...”

“When my healing services are needed, I’ll pull back. I definitely won’t push myself or anything like that. I never planned on doing more than my part, anyway.”

“...Alright. Please be careful, okay?” Galeo replied seriously.

...Although he’d lost his head a bit earlier, he was nevertheless the leader of a caravan. It looked like those merchants that traveled between cities were actually quite reliable when it came down to it.

“—Well then, any time now.”

“Yeah.”

“...?”

Despite the vagueness of Suimei’s words, Lefille nonetheless replied without a second thought. She took up a stance once more.

While Galeo was trying to puzzle out the meaning of this incredibly short exchange, the magician girl suddenly shouted.

“Everyone! They’re almost here!”

Just as she finished speaking, the forest trees’ leaves began to rustle. The sound of the wind and something passing through the trees strengthened the already nervous tension.

An adventurer, seeing Galeo glance around, and realizing that he hadn’t yet understood that the battle was about to begin, called out.

“Hey, Galeo-san! Hurry up and hide, the battle’s about to start!”

“R-right! Best of luck in battle!”

Galeo jumped in response before escaping to where they were to hide like a fleeing rabbit.

Afterward, the guards made their respective preparations.

Lefille, however, broke formation and advanced.

It looked like she, once again, planned to take care of it all by herself.

“Hey, Lefille.”

“Don’t worry. This time, I plan to intercept them right here. Suimei-kun, when the time comes, please support me.”

“Not a problem, but how do you want to coordinate things with the

others?”

“That, hmm—”

A one man show again?

Just as that thought crossed his mind again in confusion, Lefille walked out where everyone could see her and abruptly turned.

In a grand, exaggerated gesture, she plunged her sword into the ground.

The loud sound and unseen pressure turned all eyes to her.

Then—

“...I’ll be the vanguard! Everyone else, form up into a defensive formation and take out any Mazoku that get past me!” Lefille declared loudly, her actions meant to boost the morale of those who had begun to lose themselves to the fear of the Mazoku’s numbers.

Her voice almost seemed a tangible force as it resounded throughout the area.

Her voice, like rolling thunder, and her fearless, majestic aura was a match for any general.

Even if not a word was heard in reply, this definitely didn’t mean that the silence was because they looked down on Lefille’s resolve-filled words. On the contrary, the former pervasive, dark atmosphere had already lightened considerably.

Having been infected by the young woman’s atmosphere, their frantic running and shouting had already stopped. A remarkable, high-spirited mood settled upon them, and a nervous, excited energy filled them instead.

...So this is her talent, the so-called charisma in action.

Just as Lefille displayed this surprising ability, she suddenly turned to the west.

At the same time, something flew out from the forest depths – that was without a doubt, Mazoku.

A piercing cry sounded.

“T-they’re here!” someone cried out.

Still flying, the Mazoku reached them in an instant.

Suddenly, just as the Mazoku approached, Lefille dashed forward to meet them, accelerating nonstop before leaping into the air.

“HAAAAAAAA!”

—Before the other guards could even react, Lefille had already taken the lead in attacking the enemy.

Her blade flashed. With a single slash of her sword, longer than she was tall, three of the attacking Mazoku were sent flying.

As they touched down on the ground, Lefille and Mazoku faced off against one another.

The start of this battle had been crushing for the Mazoku.

This left a strong, clear impression on Mazoku and guard alike.

The guards shouted with both surprise and delight. From their safe place where they were watching, several of the merchants mirrored their excited cries.

—Just as Lefille had seized the initiative with this stunning display.

“—?!”

Mazoku presences suddenly descended from above.

Sensing this, several people looked up.

“From above!”

The magician girl’s warning was a second late as they were suddenly ambushed from above.

The Mazoku had apparently distracted them with an attack from one side while preparing to ambush them from above.

They’re trying to throw the battlefield into chaos! Shit, if they break our formation, we won’t be able to fix it.

This would destroy any advantage mages and archers held, and if this became a close-combat, tooth-and-nail fight, then they likely wouldn’t be able to separate themselves from the enemy until the battle was over.

If they were trained in how to handle situations such as this, as soldiers were, then things would be different, of course—

In any event, this was bad.

Accordingly, Suimei prepared to invoke his magic, when suddenly—

“In that case...”

A calm and cold voice left Lefille’s lips.

Accompanying her words, something happened.

“Wha—?!”

What did she just do?

Lefille’s surroundings suddenly began to glow with scarlet light.

A brilliant light that seemed as though it would sweep away the darkness radiated from the young girl. This light could only be described as the phenomenon commonly known as “aura”.

Concurrently, an enormous power altogether different from mana began to surge forth.

This power bathed her body, sword, and surroundings in dazzling light.

“—HAAAAA!”

Lefille slashed, as though to part to the heavens themselves.

Her sword was, of course, nowhere near long enough to reach her enemies from where she stood. As far as her enemies were concerned, she was simply slashing at the empty air. On the contrary, however, a brilliant crimson light traced the arc she drew in the air with her sword and continued onward, slicing apart all the Mazoku before her. Their corpses dropped to the ground.

Not even stopping to take a breath between strikes, she swung her sword relentlessly. As if a sudden storm, in an instant she’d attacked all the Mazoku who had encircled her with a tornado of slashes.

For these Mazoku, having misjudged her attack distance, this sword storm was an unavoidable, demonic whirlwind. Without so much as a cry, they were transformed into a pile of corpses.

“Wha...?” Suimei mumbled in shock.

The words “one-sided slaughter” passed through his mind.

The scene before him felt unreal. If he had to say why, then it was that scarlet light.

"Hey, wait...!"

From what he knew, that light was not something that could possibly be found in the physical world.

Generally speaking, unless some external factor were to directly interfere, something like that would never manifest physically.

—The cries of the others were of a different sort than Suimei's. They, too, were unable to fully comprehend what Lefille was doing, but their shouts were of joy.

"Amazing!"

"Hey, did you see that?! Lefille used that same technique before to chop huge monster in two with one strike, you know?!"

"...That? Lefille's used this before?"

"Eh? Yeah, she has... What about it?"

As the adventurer answered his surprised question in this manner, Suimei frowned. Perhaps because of the miraculous display happening before his eyes, he'd thought of something.

...The "huge monster" he spoke of must be the semi-giant that had been mentioned earlier.

So it's this power that defeated that thing, huh. That makes sense. If it's this power, then she should be able to kill most things with ease.

Just as she was at that moment.

"...So what about it? Something bothering you?"

"No, no. It's not like that..."

It was just that both his brain and his body seemed struck dumb by astonishment. That said, shocking though it might have been, it wasn't something to be feared.

Looking at Suimei out of the corner of his eye, a lightbulb seemed to go off in the adventurer's brain as he called out to his companions.

"Hey, stop dawdling around! Let's go help her!"

"Yes!"

Voices called out in agreement, not just those of the other members of his party, but the adventurers and other guards as well.

As this was happening, Lefille, still bathed in that bright red light, continued to slice the Mazoku in two with each strike of her sword.

"..."

Suimei, on the other hand, stayed where he was, as though frozen in place.

Although Lefille had asked him to support her when needed, from what he was witnessing now, that didn't seem necessary.

If you were to ask why, again the answer would be the red light enveloping her. In his home world, this power was known as "spirit", "telesma", or "the power of the spirits".

This was something altogether different from either mana or ether. This power found its source in spiritual beings like angels or demons, a power that was far beyond humanity, a power that came from a higher dimension.

—When it comes to higher dimensions, by the way, the wording might be

a little confusing. “High” here doesn’t refer to strength, but rather to the ability to interfere with, and resist interference from, other dimensions.

Not to say that that meant it was lacking in strength in any way either. Described simply, a power that could not be stopped by physical objects wasn’t only incredibly suited for offense, it also would not fall subject to any of the opponent’s attacks either. Such a power was practically cheat-like in its existence.

While magic was different, nevertheless depending on the strength of the practitioner in question, its power could similarly be divided into advanced and higher-dimensional power.

“Spirit”, on the other hand, was fundamentally a high order power.

And so the scene before him—

Spirit transformation? No, Lefille’s a human... No, wait a minute, that’s not right... Has there been a spirit living within her body or mind all this time...?

From what he could see, she was definitely not borrowing the power of the spirits. No, this was definitely a power she possessed all on her own.

This was what had Suimei astonished beyond all belief.

From the knowledge he possessed from his original world, a spirit existing physically in the material plane – that is, the living world – was impossible.

It was definitely the case that spirits had manifested in their world before. In both myth and legend, it was possible to confirm that such things had occurred in antiquity.

In modern day, however, the “source of existence” for devils, angels, and spirits – which were together known collectively as spirits – as well as deities both good and evil, had effectively been usurped by the expansion of science. These supernatural existences of old had more or less vanished entirely, leaving only “beings possessing similar power” existing outside of their world. Aside from a few particularly well-known and named beings, including ruling gods, none others were left.

Subsequently, if one desired use of their power, it was necessary to first communicate with them from this side and establish a contract before one would be able to manifest just a portion of their power.

For this reason, what was happening before his eyes, the sight of Lefille wielding this power as her own, completely unrestricted in any way, left him completely stupefied.

Given what he was seeing, Lefille must be half-human, half-spirit, possessing the power of the spirit and the form of a human. A truly rare existence.

...Anyway, that’s just a wild guess, but still.

That something like this can possibly exist... That’s a fantasy world for you.

Still—

“No matter how you look at it, for her to be a spirit herself, that’s just cheating...”

His surprise was to the extent that his mind had practically frozen.

That one such as he, whose goal was to delve into all the mysteries of this world, had been left in such a state was a testament to how surreal

the scene before him was.

“Something of this level—!” Lefille roared as she sent more than half of the Mazoku flying, as if intending to end every last Mazoku with a single strike.

The Mazoku, on the other hand, though still demonstrating the desire to fight, had nevertheless begun to hesitate.

“Good! Lefille, keep on doing what you’re doing! Kill them all!” the guards called out happily as they saw this.

Dominance. Victory was already within sight for those assembled.

At that moment—

“W-wait! Something’s coming! Something insanely powerful!”

Perhaps sensing the movement of mana, someone among the crowd shouted. Immediately following, the magician girl screamed out a stunned warning.

“W-what is this?! It’s enormous! Everyone be careful! An enormous power is coming this way!”

From deep in the forest behind the remaining Mazoku, an explosive sound could be heard. It was as though some gigantic creature was destroying everything in its surroundings. This sound grew steadily closer.

This was a dangerous presence. The mana it radiated was on a level utterly unlike anything they’d encountered so far.

Give me a break. Things were finally just about to calm down, too...

Dammit!

Suimei cursed inwardly. The presence drawing ever nearer gave off a

dense, dangerous aura. Lefille suddenly turned her head back.

“Everyone, get back! It’s coming!”

Next, as if to stomp out all hopes of their victory, the owner of that enormous power, destroying all trees in its wake, appeared on the battlefield.

Loosing a roar that shook the ground, a Mazoku with frightening presence touched down as if striking the earth.

CHAPTER 24

THE MAZOKU GENERAL

—He struck the ground like a thunderbolt.

If he hadn't landed on the ground itself, then he would have pulverized whatever had been in its place instead.

His hand resting upon the ground for support, the Mazoku slowly rose. He was substantially larger than the other Mazoku had been, and stood over two meters tall.

His arms and legs were as thick as logs, like an incarnation of violence itself. Suimei, a visitor from another world, was instantly reminded of the Oni of Japanese legend as well as the satyrs of Western mythology. He positively radiated a dense aura of menace.

The intense feeling of danger teeming in the air filled the humans' hearts with fear. This was a devil.

Even though he was still humanoid in form, and was even attired in a manner similar to humanity, but the specifics of his body couldn't have been more different.

"...Ho, looks like I've found what we've been looking for."

They couldn't understand what this Mazoku was saying. His fragmented words didn't even convey enough information to hazard a guess.

At the sudden appearance of this Mazoku, and the terrifying pressure they felt from him, the adventurers lost their minds out of fear.

"W-what... That guy is so much stronger than the others!"

"S, so powerful! The others can't even compare..."

In an instant, they'd lost all calm. They couldn't be blamed for that, though. Although the Mazoku that had previously appeared were frightening enough all their own, but an opponent of this level made them feel faint.

However—

Tch. This one's on a whole different level from the other Mazoku...

Because of this new opponent, Suimei, too, began to sweat. Even if he hadn't actually seen just how strong this new enemy actually was, but he was nevertheless shaken by the sudden appearance of such a powerful foe.

Over and over he told himself to calm down, but unexpectedly, it was hard to still his nervousness.

"Insects... You sure were full of yourselves just now."

The Mazoku snorted, ridiculing the humans before him.

His intentions unclear, his gaze swept across the assembled humans like a tiger staring down its prey.

"...Hmph. This is different from what I heard. Don't tell me that info we received was false...? Just where did things go wrong?" The Mazoku's voice was noticeably tinged with confusion.

Nevertheless, casting his concerns aside, the Mazoku took a deep breath.

And then—

"Whatever. What I have to do hasn't changed. —Listen up, humans! My name is Rajas! I am one entrusted with the army of the glorious Maou Nakshatra, a general of the Mazoku! Having met me here, this is the end

of the road for all of you! Obediently await your death at my hands!"

His voice shook both air and ground. The guards, already trembling before this, felt their terror grow.

"H, hii..."

A fearful whimper escaped someone's lips. The others felt as though it could well have been them. The only word that could describe their current situation was despair.

"..."

In contrast, Lefille, standing at the forefront of the human guards, simply stood unmoving before the Mazoku known as Rajas.

This couldn't be. Even someone such as she was unable to withstand the menace of this Mazoku?

Their eyes turning to this young girl who was serving as the vanguard, the gazes of the others started to show distinct unease.

Just then.

Lefille's emotions flared.

"YOU BASTAAAAAARD!"

An earth-shaking yell that in no way lost out to Rajas. A roar filled with deep fury, that cast off the fear holding the others in its grip. Red light shining once more, Lefille attacked.

"Oh?"

In the face of that whirlwind of red, Rajas revealed a fearless smile. He thrust out his fist to meet the attack head-on.

Lefille's slash was, of course, accompanied by that crimson light, but her strike was unable to reach Rajas' massive hand. Two enormous powers collided, exploding in a shower of sparks.

Her colossal blade had been stopped by the dark energy surrounding Rajas' fist, and in the end, it never made contact with his arm.

It had been a full-powered, decisive strike. The Mazoku responded with a sneer, though one that carried a hint of praise.

"Not bad, little girl."

"Of course! Do you remember this sword?"

"Hmm? Your sword?"

"—Tsk. Rajas. Don't tell me you've forgotten me already!"

Unlike the radiance that had come from her before, naked anger now flowed forth from her.

From what she just said, it looks like that Rajas guy has some sort of past with her—

The Mazoku swung his arm, knocking aside her sword.

Lefille landed firmly upon the ground and reset her stance.

The Mazoku squinted at her, and then as if suddenly recalling where he'd met her before, laughed uproariously.

"—Ahahahahahaha! I see now! I remember you now, little girl! You're that survivor of Noshias from that time, right?!"

"Eh...?"

"Huh...?"

From the Mazoku's mouth had come the name "Noshias." At this name, the others – the party of adventurers included – suddenly reacted.

Noshias was that country that was destroyed by the Mazoku. So she escaped from there. I guess that's where she met that Mazoku?

Her emotions seizing control of her person, Lefille yelled back, "...That's right! Now you remember!"

"Hahaha! Man, I'd totally figured you'd have died in the wilderness somewhere. To think you were still alive! Everyone else died, after all!"

"You bastard!"

The Mazoku's pleased smile caused Lefille to unleash another ferocious strike.

She'd completely lost herself to her rage, and lost all sense of self. Her blade was now infused with an intense energy of a degree completely beyond that which it had before possessed.

Unfortunately, the Mazoku's power was every bit its equal. Corrupt power enveloped his fist, which blocked Lefille's fierce attack. Just then, having lost her calm, the girl showed an opening.

"—Your movements are too repetitive!"

"Oh—" she called out unconsciously as her vision filled with the sight of that massive fist.

The situation was dire. The Mazoku's fist, brimming with dark energy, shot directly toward her.

If she were to get hit by that, even a spirit such as herself would not emerge unscathed.

“Tch—”

The others were frozen in suspense. That meant the only one left who could possibly turn things around was Suimei.

Clicking his tongue, Suimei activated a magic and pulled the frozen Lefille away from the incoming punch.

“Wha—?!”

“Eh—?”

Both the one who had just narrowly avoided the attack and the one whose attack had just missed cried out in surprise.

Right before the moment of impact, Suimei had darted out. Because his magic had been so hastily enacted, he hadn’t been able to create much distance between her and Rajas. That meant that Lefille was still well within Rajas’ attack range.

Accordingly, he could only advance and use his own body to defend against the incoming attack.

“Suimei-kun! You can’t! Get back!”

“A nobody like you dares to challenge me?!”

The shockwave created by Rajas’ savage attack pounded into Suimei’s body. Suimei endured the pressure as he raced toward the Mazoku at the greatest speed he was capable of mustering.

At the same time, his eyes never left his opponent’s fist. The Mazoku’s shoulder moved. The Mazoku had unleashed another punch, one that could surely smash him to bits.

Can I do what I did last time and seize the opportunity to throw him? No,

that's far too dangerous. Given the tremendous energy emanating from that fist, even the slightest contact would have disastrous consequences. Yes, that was a very bad idea indeed.

Suimei leapt upward, dodging the incoming blow, and raced up the length of the Mazoku's arm, his speed never dropping. By the time the arm had fully extended, he'd already reached the top of its body.

"Fu—"

Suimei released an earth-shattering kick on the Mazoku's shoulder with the entirety of what mana he had been able to gather in these few instants.

From his foot a strong sense of feedback came: it'd been a good hit. Nevertheless, Rajas was completely unharmed.

All Suimei had managed to accomplish had been to force Rajas' legs deeper into the ground.

—Shit. Even a solid hit like that is useless, huh.

The adventurers' swords had been decidedly effective against the Mazoku, but this was all he had been able to do. How annoying. Was there something he was missing? Usually an attack like that would have split his victim wide open from the shoulders on down. Something was strange here.

Such rude thoughts ran through Suimei's mind even as his body fluttered through the air.

"You little punk!"

A roar accompanied Rajas' massive fist. Even if it wasn't completely

aimed, it nevertheless still had enough power, or rather, more than enough, to kill him five times over.

Lefille faced off directly against this kind of power? That's a spirit for you. I'm in awe.

"—Via gravitas" (—Gravity road, take shape.)

Via gravitas. Faced with an incoming attack, he activated his magic with a single phrase, forcing his body to the ground with utmost haste. His peripheral vision caught hold of Rajas' leg kicking straight toward him.

"—?!"

In the blink of an eye, Suimei was behind him.

Watching his foe dodge what he had been sure was a certain-kill attack, Rajas' face was filled with shock. His kick landed a moment later, accompanied by an enormous crack, completely uprooting the trees in the area impacted by his attack.

I wish this guy would control his strength a little, Suimei sighed as he retreated before Rajas could turn around.

Placing some distance between them, Suimei's pace slowed as he continued to observe his opponent, brutal to the extreme.

Appearing before his squinting eyes was the rear view of the Mazoku. Its gigantic frame was accompanied by physique that was a step above that of humanity, and boasted a menacing strength. Its mana levels were an entirely different level from the other Mazoku and a pitch black, foul energy coursed around its body.

That dark power flowed forth from its body wasn't something that any

living creature should naturally possess.

Finally, Rajas turned around and their gazes met. In the next instant, Suimei had lost his opponent, dodging to the side.

“Sh—” Rajas muttered unconsciously, having been toyed with by Suimei.

Again, that massive arm came rushing toward him. In that case—

“—Omissa vicissim” (Reverse heaven and earth.)

“What?!”

His magic inverted space within a designated area. His target thus dropped headfirst into the ground.

He, of course, wasn’t expecting this to inflict any damage, but rather had intended to gain himself a precious few seconds.

To earn himself the time to chant this next incantation, that is.

Leaping backward, he shouted, “—Abreq aaaaa!”

His incantation was nevertheless interrupted.

That was because an avalanche of dirt and stone came rushing toward him.

“A clod of earth, is it...” he muttered unconsciously, his indifferent tone shaking slightly.

He waved an arm at the incoming mass.

In the blink of an eye, this massive clump of earth parted like the Red Sea before the arms of Moses.

Immediately thereafter, he came into contact with the remnants of that dark power.

...It's hard to breathe.

Indeed, "evil" was an extremely accurate description for this power. This was a power antithetical to humanity, its mere presence was enough to cause instinctive revulsion.

It looked like calling upon power from outside of this world was rather effective. The magic he had just tried was definitely the key.

...Once again, the two enemies faced off.

One side stuck his arms into his pockets while the other, having been toyed with as he had been, was surprisingly calm.

I guess that's a general for you. He knows how to keep his cool.

Brushing off the dirt from his body, Rajas spoke.

"Not bad for a punk. Even though you're a mage, you seem quite capable."

"Thanks."

"But these glancing blows aren't any use—"

"Glancing blows? From where I stand, you've just been swinging at the empty air. What are your thoughts on that?"

"Shut your mouth. Seeing as you can't hurt me at all, I wouldn't be so arrogant if I were you."

He'd laughed off his provocations. This wasn't an opponent that would let down his guard.

Lefille, having returned to a battle-ready state, reached his side—

"Suimei-kun! Please be careful! Once he gets serious, this guy's power

isn't anything like this!"

"...Are you kidding me? He's still not being serious and it's already like this? Heavens, have mercy..." Suimei muttered gloomily, not caring that his comments were ill-suited to the situation.

Rather, he really was beginning to feel depressed.

Rajas looked like he hadn't even worked up a sweat. Given what Lefille had said, it was quite possible that he hadn't even brought out 50% of his true power.

"If he wants to, then this whole area... —!"

"Oi oi, this guy is that dangerous?"

"Yes, even my slashes with this sword aren't bothering him in the least. You can't afford to be careless."

Judging by the white-knuckled grip she had on her sword, she seemed to have been remembering something particularly unpleasant. Actually, that had to be the case. There's no way she didn't have a memory like that.

"Hahaha, exactly. You're just a human mage, don't get too full of yourself..."

"Ku—"

Lefille groaned at the sudden swell of power. In her eyes, a trace of apprehensiveness appeared.

...If his enemy possessed a power of this degree, then he couldn't afford to just let things continue like this. He would act before things passed the point of no return.

And so...

“Archatius over—” (Mana furnace, charge—)

—Just as Suimei began his incantation, the situation suddenly changed.

Rajas, who he was sure was about to attack, instead looked over at Lefille and laughed.

“Kukukuku...”

“What’s so funny?!”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just thought of something fun.”

” ‘Something fun?’ ”

Rajas didn’t bother to answer as he took to the sky.

“I’ll take my leave from the battlefield for now.”

“Wh—?!”

“Don’t forget, though, girl from Noshias – your power doesn’t mean the tiniest thing before us. Once I gather all my subordinates in the area, I’ll be back!”

“Subordinates...? That’s...”

“This was just one part of my forces. Just a tiny fraction, really. Do remember that,” Rajas added, as Lefille could barely speak. “Don’t bother hoping for salvation though. I’ve brought an enormous army with me, and my orders were to ‘Crush all human opposition without mercy’.”

With that, Rajas turned and left with the other surviving Mazoku.

Lefille started to give chase, but as she began to rush off—

“W-wait!”

“Lefille!”

“—!”

Suimei grabbed her shoulder. Her actions were meaningless.

She flipped him a look that asked why he was stopping her. He shook his head. Seemingly understanding, she finally seemed to regain control of herself.

“Are you okay?” Suimei asked with concern.

“Yeah, sorry... I lost my cool,” she answered regretfully.

☆

As things calmed down in the wake of the Mazoku’s departure, Suimei shifted to the task that had been awaiting him.

Healing. While there were other magicians capable of restorative magic, their knowledge of these was only on par with Suimei. Adding in the knowledge of curative magic he’d brought from his own world, his abilities far surpassed theirs.

“Whew. With this, we’re done,” he sighed, having finished up with the last person who had needed to be healed.

Because healing wasn’t his specialty, there were still some places where he could stand to improve, but his self-evaluation of his healing ability was still rather high.

The guard he had just healed swung his arm a few times in test as he thanked him, “Sorry about this, Mage onii-san.”

“Not at all, this is what I’m here for, after all.”

At this answer, the guard laughed happily.

“Still, you’re pretty amazing. That magic you used just now healed my

wound without even leaving a scar, and I can even use my arm right away. I've never seen such a perfected healing technique."

"It's not common to be able to move the affected body part after healing?"

"That, huh. Well, with small wounds, sure, but not with larger ones. That's common knowledge, right?"

"Huh."

That was unexpected.

From what he'd said, Suimei surmised that the restriction was due to the fact that mages were only healing what they could see. Although the visible wound was healed, that nevertheless did not mean the healing had been complete.

"Is that not how you're doing it?"

"You could say that."

Suimei gave an ambiguous reply.

When it came to this issue, further investigation was warranted.

On a different note.

"—Is it just me, or has it gotten really noisy over there?"

A little ways off merchants and guards were gathered and were making a racket.

"...Yeah. Maybe we're about to leave? Would that be why?" the guard guessed unconcernedly.

From what Rajas had said, his Mazoku soldiers had already begun to

gather. This wasn't the time to be leisurely taking their time, they needed to leave.

This clamor though, what was causing it?

"Well, your healing's already finished, so why don't we go take a look?"

"Sure."

His back to the guard, Suimei headed in the direction of the racket.

As he arrived, he noticed a tension in the atmosphere.

What was the cause of this? This question plaguing his thoughts, he continued to observe the situation, taking note of the fact that the guards and merchants seemed to have someone surrounded.

The one surrounded was none other than the one who had been courageously engaged in battle until just now – Lefille.

Typically speaking, one who had heroically and singlehandedly dominated the Mazoku as she had would be treated with great respect, but the mood dominating the crowd was that of nervousness and unease. The scene simply could not in any way be seen as congratulatory in nature.

Surrounded as she was, Lefille opened her mouth to speak, intending to dispel the atmosphere.

"...Why have you asked me to come here? There are other things that should take precedence, no?" Lefille asked as her gaze took in the faces of those encircling her.

An adventurer stepped forward.

"And what would that be?"

"To move somewhere safer, obviously. If we dawdle here, there's a good

chance the Mazoku will attack again.”

“Attack again...”

His words were filled with deep, dark emotion.

At his response, Lefille repeated her suggestion, more forcefully this time.

“What? Is there something you want to say? If so, then just say it alr—”

“Yeah, I do. The Mazoku attacked us because of you, didn’t they? You’re a survivor of Noshias, right?”

“—!”

“...What do you mean ‘just say it already’? Stop playing dumb. This is all your fault! It’s all your fault that we were attacked, that we were targeted by the Mazoku!” the adventurer spat.

The harsh words left Lefille hesitant and uncertain.

“C-certainly we were targeted, but it has nothing to do with me...”

“And how do you know that?”

“...”

Lefille was left speechless in the face of their malice.

Even though Rajas had certainly said that he’d an eye on her, but there was no way to know that that was why the Mazoku had attacked.

The adventurer’s certainty wasn’t justified, but without evidence to the contrary, she couldn’t exactly refute his claims either.

“That Mazoku was hunting for you, wasn’t he? We were all dragged into this because he wants you dead.”

“T-that’s...”

" 'That's...' what? If you have an explanation, then spit it out already!"

She couldn't respond, bowing her head instead.

Unable to prove that she was innocent of the accusation, she could only keep her silence. Suimei, however, knew how to rebut their claims.

"Can I say something?"

"Huh?"

"When we were fighting that Mazoku earlier, didn't he tell Lefille, 'I remember you now'? In other words, only then did he notice that Lefille was present here. That being the case, there's no way they came here intentionally targeting her from the very beginning."

Unfortunately.

"Ha, that's your proof?! That has nothing to do with anything!"

"And why the hell not...?!"

The adventurer had already lost the ability to make rational judgments. He was too sure that he was right.

Gesticulating wildly, he continued.

"That's because they just had some general intel on her whereabouts! Only after searching the area did they find who they were looking for! Or do you have proof to the otherwise?!"

His argument was that they only knew the general location of their enemy and that her precise whereabouts had only become clear after the first attack. To be sure, that explanation did explain some things—

"Moreover, don't you remember what this girl said after we were ambushed? She knew that our attackers were Mazoku! Why would she

know that?! They could very well have been monsters or magical beasts! No, there's an easy way to explain her certainty – she already knew that there were Mazoku hunting her!"

—It was only then that Suimei noticed. This was the adventurer who'd come to warn them of the attack. At this moment, the memory of his doubting gaze came to mind.

However.

"Hmph. Preposterous. That was just because Lefille is sensitive to the Mazoku's presence."

"You may be right, but... Do you have any evidence of that?"

"That—"

What a leading manner of questioning. With questions like that, Suimei couldn't really answer.

If he were to ask Suimei to produce evidence of his claims, then Suimei, of course, would not be able to do so.

Plus, given the current mob mentality, even if he had managed to produced the evidence asked for, it wouldn't have changed a thing.

"You can't do it, can you? Then scram."

"What...?"

Every new word from the man irritated Suimei more and more.

The man's provocative tone and words sent his blood pressure soaring.

The wall of people parted, and a man appeared.

"Hold it, you two!"

“Galeo-san...”

They turned in the direction of the new voice. The roar had come from the merchants’ leader – Galeo.

“You’re all here to guard the caravan. If dissension breaks out among the ranks, it’s going to cause problems for others. Your argument ends now.”

“If the argument is to end, does that mean you’ve already decided on a plan of action, Galeo-san?”

“Yes. I’m the head of this caravan. I’ll take charge of judging this case.”

“O-oh...”

The adventurer could only nod his head when faced with Galeo’s decisive words and attitude. Even though he was rather small in stature, he was nevertheless the leader of a caravan. His character far surpassed that of this adventurer.

“Is that acceptable to everyone else?” Galeo asked the others.

They all nodded. The complaining voices directed at Lefille were thus silenced.

Confirming that the outburst had ended, he turned to Lefille and spoke coldly.

“...Gurakis-san, I’m the leader of this caravan. That means that I must place the safety of this group first and foremost.”

He hadn’t explicitly stated his conclusion yet, but everyone knew where he was going with this.

Explaining this in full seriousness, he meant to—

“We’ve been targeted by the Mazoku, and you are the reason. As the one

responsible for this group, I can't just leave this situation alone. Do you know what I mean?"

"I do. I understand. You want me to go."

"—?!"

"That is correct."

His roundabout manner of speaking notwithstanding, Lefille had understood what he was getting at. Galeo nodded at her response. Responding to the turn of events, the crowd began to murmur once more.

"Of course!"

"Get the hell out of here!"

"You jinx!"

Overly cruel words. Regardless of whether or not Lefille had indeed been the cause for the attacks, she had never intended to bring harm to the caravan. In any event, the one in greatest danger at the moment was her. The one they should be most concerned about was her.

That was how it should have been, anyway. This manner of kicking someone when they were down was going way too far.

Suimei could restrain himself no longer.

"Hey! You're just going to force her out all alone?!"

"Of course we are! The Mazoku were targeting us because of this girl, you know?! Staying together with this girl means going up against that Mazoku general and his army!"

"Even so! If she's all alone, what's she going to do about food and water?!"

Even putting the Mazoku issue aside, this was another important facet of things.

Whether or not you were traveling alone, food and water were a matter of life and death. Ensuring that you had sufficient provisions to last was a necessary part of travel.

Since the caravan was fundamentally for the purpose of transport, carrying along large amounts of food and water was a non-problem. This was not the case for a lone person, however.

If you were to either misjudge either the amount of provisions needed or the distance to be traveled, then it was quite possible to run out of supplies before you'd reached your destination.

Without anywhere to stay along the road, the danger posed to her by exiling Lefille from the group at this point was easy enough to imagine.

The adventurer didn't seem to care, though.

"I don't know anything about that! It has nothing to do with us, anyway!"

He actually said something like that.

Suimei turned to the others.

"...And you all feel similarly?" he couldn't help but ask, though he knew the answer even before he spoke.

As he'd expected, his question was met with cold words and colder gazes.

"...Tch."

His teeth gritted in response. The adventurer looked at him with contempt before saying something truly outrageous.

"And? How long are you going to pretend? I know that, deep down, you

also think this girl should get the hell out. Am I wrong?"

"WHAT?! I would never—"

"Pretending to be her friend this whole time, you're too far to back out now? Or what? Deceived by her good looks? I guess there's that, she is pretty – at least on the outside."

"Wh—"

"Hmph. Not only did she bring the Mazoku upon us, but she's also the kind of woman who leads men astray—"

This last line was the straw that broke the camel's back for Suimei, his rage boiling over as coldness seized his heart.

I won't be silent.

No matter what, his vulgarity had gone too far; he'd done something which Suimei was simply incapable of doing.

That's why it couldn't be helped if Suimei, unable to control himself any longer, raised his fingers toward the adventurer, preparing to snap them.

"What? You want to start something?"

Not realizing the perilous situation he was in, the adventurer said something fatally stupid. In just a second more, that smug smile would be wiped from his face—

Suddenly, Suimei, about to give form to his fury, was stopped by Lefille.

"—Stop it, Suimei-kun!"

"..."

"What do you think you're doing?! This won't change anything!"

“Tch...”

Lefille’s words of restraint brought Suimei back to his senses. Thinking it over, he came to the same conclusion – his actions wouldn’t change the end result. Her exit was already inevitable, something that was obvious to anyone thinking calmly.

In order to reduce the risk to the caravan as much as possible, it was necessary for her to leave.

His voice tinged with regret, Galeo spoke.

“Gurakis-san. We’re going to leave now. I think you know what you need to do...”

“I do. I’ll head in a direction different from the one the caravan takes, I understand.”

“That’s right,” was his only response. This was necessary to minimize risk to the group.

As the two spoke, Suimei abruptly turned to the adventurer party that was well acquainted with Lefille.

The magical girl who had laughed and chatted happily with her and the warrior who had praised her ability. At this time, their gazes, like the others were estranged. They weren’t even willing to meet Lefille’s eyes, let alone come to her aid.

Suimei, however, couldn’t blame them. They were afraid of the Mazoku army. If they were to ignore the feelings of the others and protect Lefille, then who could say what the consequences would be? Plus, it wasn’t like they could be sure that Lefille wasn’t in fact the target of the Mazoku.

In such a situation, they could only prioritize their own safety. Suimei didn't intend to criticize their cowardice, however; he, of all people, did not have that right.

...At long last, negotiations over provisions settled, Lefille called out to Suimei.

"Lefille..."

"...Our time together has been short, Suimei-kun, but I'll pray for your safety."

"..."

How can she smile at a time like this? His gaze fixed on her smile, he wanted to ask, "Is this really okay?" but he knew that she'd simply reply that it was.

She turned away. The sight of that back, carrying that large sword with such ease, carried no trace of the reliability that it had once shown. No, burned into his vision now was the fading figure of a young girl who looked every bit her age.

And that's why—

"Hey, let's get going."

Right, and that's why—

"Hey, did you hear me?"

Right, this is different from that time with Reiji and the others.

Yeah, this is no different from forsaking Lefille.

Lefille, and that vulnerable, retreating back and gaze, would thus be abandoned to a lonely hell without so much as a single hand outstretched

to her.

“...Give me my provisions.”

Before he realized it, the words had already left his mouth.

“Huh?” the adventurer said in shock.

His gaze still following Lefille, Suimei continued.

“I’m going with her. Thanks for watching over me until now.”

“Huh?” the adventurer repeated.

Galeo sighed.

“Are you really okay with this? If you leave us now, you won’t be rewarded for the commission, you know?”

“I don’t need that sort of thing, but I do need food and water. Consider it payment for my work up to this point if you wouldn’t mind.”

“...I understand. Take care of yourself out there, Yakagi-san,” Galeo replied, his eyes closed, giving in without trying to persuade him otherwise.

If he did not possess this sort of calm, disinterested disposition he could never have made it as a caravan leader.

“What’s this? In the end, you still—”

—*BOOM*

Without getting to finish, the adventurer was sent flying by Suimei’s magic. He’d already lost all patience and had no desire to allow the man’s vulgarity to further offend his ears.

“Hey, are you really going to be okay...?” the warrior asked, concern on

his face.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” Suimei replied, filling his bag with provisions.

Chapter 03(Volume 02 LN)

Demon General Rajas (2nd half)



Part 5 <The part that follows right after WN chapter 24>

“— Suimei was used as bait!?”

After Rofuri went out to perform sentry duties against any Mazoku that might follow, Reiji’s roar erupted in the vicinity that turned quiet.

— No need to worry. Gregory started his long speech with that opening line, stunning Reiji who couldn’t believe what he heard, pressing forward as if he was going to grab him by the collar.

He didn’t show a shred of respect. This intense expression of the man known as a hero scared Gregory.

"Is that true!?"

"Y-Yes! It is just as I said."

"Wha...!"

Reiji was too shocked to say anything. This was no joking matter, and must be the truth.

As Reiji bit his lips and was about to grab Gregory by his shirt.

Titania who had been at a loss all this while stepped in to restrain Reiji.

"P-Please calm down, Reiji-sama!"

"B-But!"

"Gregory isn't done yet, please let him finish his story..."

"... Understood."

Titania had a point. Like she said, Gregory only got to the part about 'Suimei-dono would be the bait so there shouldn't be much danger on this end'.

... Seeing Reiji accept her counsel, Titania patted her chest and sighed in relief. Next, Titania who had always been gentle used an unexpectedly stern gaze and voice to command Gregory:

"Gregory, tell us everything with not a single bit of falsehood. Can you do that?"

"... By your will."

Gregory knelt as he answered the princess. Maybe he was intimidated by her piercing gaze as sweat wetted his forehead and he started his tale again.

"... I heard about this when we met our contact person earlier. According to him, the Mazoku sent an army to the borders of Aster in order to kill the hero. They used Suimei-dono as bait in order to save the hero-dono

from that army”

At this moment, Reiji whose expression was gloomy started questioning Gregory.

“You mentioned that Suimei is used as bait, how exactly? Did they ask Suimei to act as a decoy...”

“No. Suimei-dono doesn’t know about this.”

Everyone already expected Gregory to say that, but to pull this off would be rather difficult in reality. Since Suimei was acting as bait without knowing about it himself, a question arises.

“... So how did they make Suimei the bait? Wouldn’t Mehter be attacked?”

“Yes, about that, the plan was enacted to match Suimei-dono’s departure from Mehter...”

“Match his departure?”

“Hmm? Hmm? W-Why? Suimei-kun never said he wanted to leave the capital?”

Yes, when they left the castle, Suimei only told them he wanted to live outside the castle. Mizuki question was only natural, since it contradicted what happened when they left Mehter.

“A-After we set off from Mehter, there was news about Suimei searching for a caravan escort assignment through the adventurer’s guild.”

“Suimei visited the adventurer’s guild?”

“Yes. According to intel, Suimei seemed to have become a member of the Twilight Pavilion. From this, it could be speculated that he planned to leave Mehter all along... The nobles who knew about this and is related to

the Demon King subjugation campaign used Suimei to..."

So he was exploited. But this led to more questions. What was Suimei trying to do, he turned down the journey with Reiji and company for the sake of safety in the first place. But despite that, he registered in the adventurer's guild and accepted a caravan escort request. He wouldn't have done that if he didn't have a plan.

"Suimei-kun, what happened...? It's dangerous to leave the city, he should know that."

"I don't know. But I think Suimei must have acted after thinking it through."

Seeing that unease was wavering in Mizuki's eyes, Reiji asked Gregory once again:

"Forget it. The reason why Suimei could become the bait is clear. But why did the nobles do that? They didn't need to go out of their way and use Suimei as the decoy."

That's right, with the Mazoku invading with an army and their allies having limited manpower, the only option was to escape. Since running away would be good enough, there wasn't any reason to use Suimei as bait.

"Hero-dono, there is a large Mazoku army heading our way. They might be slow because of their scale, but they are still Mazoku after all. No matter how slow they are marching, the area they can cover is on a different level from the march of a human army. In order to avoid the possibility of the hero being captured, Lord Hardias..."

"So it's Duke Hardias!?"

"Yes..."

Because Titania's voice was filled with surprise, Gregory lowered his head timidly.

Who is this Duke Hardias, I think I heard his name a long while ago.

Reiji tried searching his memories, but came up empty.

"Sorry Tia, but who is Duke Hardias?"

"... Duke Hardias is one of the handful of grand noble in Aster, he had been appointed by father to plan the defence against the Demon King invasion. However..."

"And the matter of Suimei becoming the bait?"

In response, Titania nodded heavily even though she didn't have any proof. Gregory who knew the situation said:

"...Yes. Like I explained, This is the decision Duke Hardias and some of the nobles made on their own. And of course, they have no doubts about the power of the hero Reiji, but they judged that it was still too early to face the opposing army directly, even with the help of supporting troops. That's why they came up with this plan."

"... But even so, this is not a reason to forcibly make Suimei the bait, isn't that right?"

"With regards to that, it still isn't clear why the Mazoku can sense the existence of the hero. The Mazoku who were captured by Hardias' men only said they were here to kill the hero, and nothing more, but even so.... Pardon me, but I can't confirm the reason with you either, maybe Suimei who was also summoned can disrupt the eyes of the enemy more

easily... That's why false information was leaked to the Mazoku, diverting them to target the caravan Suimei-dono was traveling with."

This method might be effective too. Their group have not engaged the Mazoku army as of now, which was definitely related to them knowing the existence of the hero, but was unable to pinpoint his location.

Assuming that the Mazoku could sense the summoning of the hero through some means, no matter how accurate that method was, there was value in launching a preemptive attack. They only knew the rough position of the hero and they still eagerly march their army that way. This meant they reckon that they had a good chance of defeating the hero.

In that case, a piece of information was necessary. That was the timing of the hero summoning.

"... The truth might have been exposed to the Mazoku when we announced to the whole world about our journey. But from the attacks so far— Is that possible?"

"That's right, it's hard to think of it that way. Like Mizuki said, the Mazoku is moving too fast."

Therefore, someone amongst the Mazoku sensed the hero summoning before the news broke out.

"How did Duke Hardias leak the false information to the Mazoku...? He couldn't have an acquaintance in the Mazoku right? How did he manage that?"

"A-According to the contact person, soldiers were sent to Charlotte as messengers to spread the word to those who didn't know about the Mazoku that the hero was hidden in the caravan heading towards Kurand."

"What!?"

"I-In that case, could it be..."

Terrible thoughts swirled in her mind as Mizuki's voice started to tremble. She seemed to have grasped the meaning behind Gregory's words accurately. The face of the young girl turned pale with unease. Gregory answered with an expression that was a mix of bitterness and regret to the young girl:

"... If the soldiers who only know the false information were captured, they will be interrogated and spill what their mission was. However, if the soldiers were fed false information from the very start, they will only divulge false information no matter how they much they get interrogated. If the Mazoku fall for it, then the plan would be a success. That's why the proposal passed through in no time..."

"For such a thing to..."

"This is too much..."

This incident shocked the two girls badly. Titania covered her mouth and was dumbstruck, while Mizuki looked as if she was on the verge of tears.

In front of the two girls, Reiji shouted angrily at Gregory:

"... Using human like this... I-Isn't that going overboard!? What do they think lives are!?"

"T-The life of hero-dono cannot be compared to the life of soldiers. If we lose the hero who can save tens of thousands of people for the sake of a dozen or so soldiers, it would not be worth it."

"Has Suimei been sacrificed because of such logic...!"

"The people in the caravan are also unrelated to this. But..."

Gregory became quiet as he listened to Reiji lose his temper and shout, and Mizuki groan. He must have his own thoughts about using the lives of soldiers in such a way.

Reiji calmed down after venting for a while, and tried his best to calm down and said:

"... Is there no other way?"

"When I learned about this, the Mazoku army was already halfway across the territory of Charlotte, and pressing on to the mountainous region of the border. It is too late to do anything about it at this point..."

"Since you already knew, why didn't you say anything!"

"T-This can't be helped! I was ordered not to reveal this before the time comes, as a knight, I don't have the authority to ignore this order... And when I knew about it, it was already..."

"T-Then... Suimei-kun is..."

"... He has probably made contact with the Mazoku. According to the misinformation we spread, we only mentioned that Suimei-dono didn't have any outstanding features, wore strange clothes, and the approximate position of the caravan. There are no guarantees, but if they search the one who matches such conditions..."

"B-But! If he ran off somewhere to hide..."

"That would be difficult. It seems that the claws of the Mazoku even reached the inside of the Neruferian Empire. This means the Mazoku army was really large in scale. Since there already is a specific target zone, I

think they will comb the area thoroughly. In that case, the caravan that didn't know anything will..."

When they heard Gregory's speculations, everyone had a complicated expression. They were all dumbstruck, probably because of sadness, depression, or both. Both Mizuki and Titania probably felt that Suimei who didn't possess any power will be safe. Even Reiji was starting to feel this way.

At this moment, Titania spoke again.

"... Our national defence, no, what about the defences for Mehter and Kurand?"

"That's right... Now that you mention that!"

Titania's words snapped Reiji back to reality. What happened to Suimei filled his entire head, so he didn't thought about this part. If the Mazoku was targetting Suimei, that meant the country had been invaded by the Mazoku. There was no reason for them to stop their invasion after taking out the caravan. Thinking logically, that meant the city in the vicinity would be exposed to danger.

"Yes. For the defences of Kurand, the local mecenaries and Mage guild had already started recruiting people who could fight, the adventurer's guilds are also gathering their elites in secret. As for Mehter, the knights and Mage corps are selecting and gathering trained personnel, and are organizing them into units."

"If they could deal with it so smoothly, then why did they use Suimei as bait..."

"There isn't enough time to organize the units. To ensure there was time

to issue orders and mobilize the units in Kurand, sacrificing Suimei-dono and the caravan was the only way..."

So there was no other way. In other to save the many, they had to discard the few. The logic was correct, but wasn't it too much for the people who didn't want to be sacrificed?

The idea that Suimei was in the dark about this made Reiji really anxious. Mizuki who was beside Reiji was blinking tears away from the corner of her eyes because of this cruel blow.

"This is too much, this is really too much..."

Her moan and tears were definitely her true feelings. She had the tenacity to take part in the Demon King subjugation campaign, but she was still a girl... The kingdom summoned them to seek their help, but treated those who didn't help in such a way. When she heard about this, Mizuki couldn't help sobbing in sorrow.

It was the same for Titania. She lowered her head with her face a mixture of regret, pain and depression. This happened right after befriending them.

Once again, Gregory knelt onto the ground.

"My most sincere apologies!"

What's the use of apologizing like this. It wouldn't change the fact that Suimei was in danger. Reiji couldn't find the words to respond, even his wrath had burnt out. The only thing left was a melancholy he couldn't shake away. The figure of the middle-age knight with his forehead on the ground was right in front of him. What was he thinking when he made this apology? Was he just making a show of apology with a look of

absolute sincerity, but he was actually suppressing a smile in his heart?

How could he find out his true intentions? As Reiji was thinking about things that made him hate himself.

Ah—

Reiji felt inspiration struck like lightning.

Is that so. Thinking it through calmly, it was easy to understand.

“Reiji-kun?”

Mizuki looked at Reiji who seemed to have understood something—

“That’s enough, Gregory-san.”

“H-Hero-dono?”

He put his hands on Gregory’s shoulders, ending his long apology. That’s right, there was no need to apologize. Or rather, he should be thankful to Gregory. Because—

“Gregory-san. When we asked about this, you should have been told not to divulge everything. You must have been ordered to tell us the Mazoku is in the vicinity, and guide us to some other place.”

Titania and Gregory were dumbstruck, and Mizuki asked immediately:

“Reiji-kun, what is the matter?”

“If Gregory-san was really an underling of that noble Hardias, he wouldn’t need to tell us about Suimei in the first place. Gregory-san just needed to let us keep running away, and not tell us something that would make us distrust him.”

“Ah...”

Mizuki's mutter of comprehension was soft, but it was clearer than any other sound in the vicinity.

Earning distrust. That's right, the words did seem strange when she thought about it. If he told them the truth about Suimei's situation, it would definitely earn their ire. If he understood that, then he wouldn't have done so. If it was the underlings of the ones who planned this, they would definitely hide the facts about Suimei.

But Gregory still told them all of this, probably because there was something in his heart that couldn't be twisted. And because of this sense of justice, he couldn't hold it in anymore.

"I am very sorry. I only realize this now. I am truly sorry for shouting at you without thinking properly."

"Hero-dono..."

Gregory's voice started choking as Reiji lower his head and conveyed his thoughts clearly.

Seeing him like this, Titania also said:

"Gregory, my sincere apologies. I didn't trust you until I heard what Reiji said."

Gregory lowered his head deeply when he heard that.

And as if he was confessing a sin, he slowly said:

"... I couldn't do it. Tricking the people who had nothing to do with this world but was summoned to defeat the Demon King, and even accepted this duty. However, pretending not to know anything when their friend is in danger, is inhumane..."

Gregory who opened his heart to the others lowered his head once more.

"My deep apologies. I couldn't do anything."

"That's enough. Enough. Because—"

That's right, if anyone was to be blamed, it was all his own fault. Reiji was the only one who was summoned, but his two friends were dragged in. He even ignored his friend's advice, which led to this. Hence—

"... Reiji-sama?"

Titania asked as Reiji got up and turned his back.

But Reiji didn't turn back, so Titania called out to him anxiously again.

"W-Where do you want to go, Reiji-sama?"

"...Do you even need to ask? I'm going to rescue Suimei now."

"How can that be, what do you want to do by going there now!?"

"H-Hero-dono! I understand how you feel, but you wouldn't make it even if you go now! There are no horses now either!"

"There is another horse. Rofuri's horse."

"Y-You are right Reiji, but there's nothing you can do even if you go now! Even if you make it, there is still an army of Mazoku there. You will just be throwing your life away!"

Reiji couldn't refute Titania's counsel. What she said was true, there was no doubt about it. Titania stopped him again:

"Reiji-sama, please reconsider this. If anything happened to Reiji-sama, Then who will defeat Nakshatra?"

"... Ugh!"

Yes, just like Titania said, Since he accepted their request and came here, that meant he was already the hero. Forgetting that and running amok because of his emotions and losing his life, was in a way betraying them.

— Even so, there were some things he couldn't accept.

"No..."

"R-Reiji-sama?"

"I don't want to abandon Suimei. Suimei is my friend, so..."

He was gritting his teeth from regret and clenching his fist, but Reiji didn't give up, he still want to help his friend. Just like Mizuki, Suimei was his irreplaceable friend. That's why he didn't want to lose him. It might already be too late, but he didn't want to just stand idly by.

Titania looked at him with a worried gaze. From her eyes, it was clear she was in a dilemma between subjugating the Demon King and her own feelings. She probably didn't know what to do.

Shifting Titania out of his sight, Reiji turned towards Mizuki.

"... Mizuki."

"I-I want to..."

"Mizuki! Let's go! To help Suimei!"

Grabbing Mizuki's shoulders, Reiji urged the young girl. Urging her strongly to help their friend, because he believed that if it was her, she will definitely agree.

"Ah, ugh..."

When he noticed, Mizuki was trembling a little.

“Ah...”

From her deep black eyes, Reiji could tell that Mizuki was trembling from fear.

That’s right, this young girl entered the battlefield for the first time just now. Her first fight, facing off against the Mazoku for the first time. Back then, Reiji felt her fear during the battle. If that was the case, was it really fine to force this young girl to take on the Mazoku army with him?

No, it’s definitely not fine. It’s not fine pushing such a burden on a trembling young girl at all.

At this instant, the term ‘being full of oneself’ floated in his mind. Thinking back about how everyone else thought, he looked around him again, and saw doubt in everyone’s faces.

“... I am sorry, Mizuki.”

“R-Reiji-kun?”

He turned his back to the voice calling out to him after apologizing. Even now, he still didn’t want to give up. So—

“Just me alone would be fine, everyone please wait in a safe place. Rofuri-san!”

Reiji shouted at Rofuri who was just returning from a patrol some distance away. Rofuri who didn’t know what was happening tilted his head as he rode over.

“Yes? How may I serve, Reiji-sama?”

“Lend me your horse.”

“Hmm? Alright, no problem, what are you...”

As Rofuri dismounted, the voice of two people echoed out as if they were trying to cut him off.

“Please wait, Reiji-sama!”

“Wait, Reiji-kun!”

The cries came from behind Reiji. At this moment, Reiji—

Part 6

Suimei who left the caravan to chase after Lefille was walking in the forest as he track the traces of the girl's magic presence. He couldn't catch up immediately probably because Lefille left rather swiftly in order to not trouble the caravan. It wasn't strange for the girl who left according to Galeo's wishes without any complains to act this way.

As he strolled in the forest in search of Lefille, Suimei looked up at the forest canopy obscuring his view of the cloudy sky and thought:

This place is completely untamed. Wild beasts or monsters from a fantasy world will probably show up...

Suimei stopped for a moment to rest and leaned against the tree before him. He drank about a mouthful of water from his canteen, and sighed. It was a given that there were monsters here. The forest of this different world was obviously much more dangerous than the world he came from.

I actually entered a place like this by my own will, ara...

He probably felt that it was strange, or that this was a foolish action. But even if Suimei asked himself that, he couldn't get an answer anyway as his doubt started to expand in his mind. At this moment, right before he moistened his throat with water again, Suimei asked nonchalantly.

"— I am sorry for making you so tense, but please spare me from your blade."

"——!?"

These words were directed at the killing intent behind him that was filled with nervousness.

Suimei's calm voice echoed in the serene forest. Shortly after, the noise of

grass being trampled could be heard, and a certain familiar voice that was filled with bafflement entered his ears.

"... Suimei-kun? Why are you here?"

"Well, as you can see, I came here for you."

Looking back, the figure of Lefille with the tip of her sword drooping down was right behind her. Because Suimei had a weak sense of presence, Lefille thought he was a beast that was stalking her, and was planning to cleave him along with the tree he was leaning on in half.

"You chased after me...? That's too reckless, it is dangerous to stay with me alright? Why did you do that?"

"Well, it's because leaving you alone is too dangerous. I am very concerned."

"D-Don't worry. I can manage on my own. You are just butting into my affairs unnecessarily."

"You can deal with the danger by yourself?"

"Yes."

That's how proud and headstrong Lefille was. Suimei made an accusation with a sarcastic smile:

"Pardon me for being blunt, but do you have enough food and water?"

"Ugh... Well, that..."

"Is that so?"

Lefille was dumbstruck as she averted her gaze awkwardly. As the girl before Suimei was being forced to admit her defeat, Lefille thought of a retort and turned back to her usual serious expression.

“But you are not carrying any luggage too right? Someone who didn’t even prepare his own provision is not qualified—”

“Are you still going to say that after seeing this?”

As if he was trying to break her serious expression, Suimei said casually as he took out a luggage bag from the briefcase he was carrying, even though it was much larger than the briefcase.

“... To tell me off...”

“What was that about being qualified? Are you saying the amount of provision I prepared is not qualified?”

Before Suimei who seemed rather arrogant, Lefille was shocked.

The amount was definitely up to standard. Suimei’s student briefcase made use of magic to expand its capacity. Even the combination of Kabbalah and Alchemy could only increase the capacity to that of a 150 litre foreign made luggage bag.

<TL: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabbalah>>

“... What is this weird magic item?”

“Calling it weird, how mean... Anyway, you can’t say I am an unnecessary busybody now, right?”

“That might be so... Suimei-kun, do you really think it is fine to stay with me?”

“What can I do if I say I am regretting it very much?”

“Erm... I am sorry.”

“Not at all. If I will regret it immediately, I wouldn’t have come. Don’t worry about it.”

Facing Lefille who was lowering her head with a gloomy expression, Suimei answered as if he was joking. That's right, he wouldn't be here if he wasn't worried about how Lefille felt, it was impossible for him to regret this.

Even though he said that, Lefille still couldn't accept the way Suimei cut off his retreat path without anything to gain.

"But I am being targeted by the Mazoku you know?"

"True."

"If that is so..."

If that is so, how should I put it? Lefille understood she was in the weaker position, and couldn't make such high handed speech. Looking at Lefille who was caught in anxiety, Suimei spoke:

"Lefille, you think it would be better if I stayed with the caravan and leave you alone?"

"That is..."

Suimei raised a different question to Lefille who couldn't answer. Peering through the forest canopy, the sky was cloudy just like the gloomy atmosphere between them. Suimei said calmly as if he was asking the question to the sky.

"— Hey, tell me the truth Lefille, which side do you think is better?"

"What do you mean..."

"For you, would you rather I come here or stay with the caravan?"

"D-Do you even need to ask!? Staying with the caravan is better! That's what you should do!"

"Really?"

"R-Really."

Lefille made a face that seemed a little angry, and answered as if she was confirming something. Was she angry because she was not believed, or was she just putting on a strong front? Suimei pointed at Lefille and dealt the final blow.

"Then, can you swear to Alshuna that you are not lying?"

"What!? That is..."

"How about it?"

"... You really are a mean man."

After Lefille sighed in resignation, Suimei asked again:

"Well then, how do you feel about it?"

"Ahhh, it's great here if you can come. But—"

"In that case, isn't it fine?"

"Huh—"

"Nothing, there is no need to debate whether this is a wise choice. It's fine if we feel like it, so let's stop the topic here. This is the smoother way of dealing with it, right?"

"Ah..."

Suimei looked at Lefille who turned silent after hearing something unexpected.

It's true. Even if they discuss this further, what could they achieve? The best way of doing things couldn't be found if you don't search for it. Just

arriving at the answer and saying it out would be enough. No matter how much she argued, the sorrow and pain in her heart wouldn't fade.

That's why he didn't want to continue arguing about it. No matter how much they argue, the conclusion wouldn't change. Hence, Suimei interrupted what Lefille wanted to say.

"... What? You still have some complaints?"

"No. Everything is as you said in the beginning."

Her voice was more cheerful than earlier. She didn't accept it outright, but she still rolled with it.

Suimei scratched his head and sighed. From the perspective of a third party, his choice right now wasn't correct. Doing this would only give him disadvantages. But the decision on whether this action was right had to be made by the person himself. If the subject thought that it was correct, it wouldn't be a big deal even if it wasn't the best or wisest choice.

— And brooding too much about the pros and cons at this point would be rather shameful.

"I'm sorry, Suimei-kun."

"Why do you need to apologize?"

"It's probably my fault that the Mazoku came. That's why..."

"Ahhh, what that bulky Mazoku said? But at that time, it seemed like it was the first time he remembered you though. No matter how I see it, I don't think he was targeting you from the very beginning."

Suimei objected to her apology. That was just excessive self reproach on herself. What Rajas said was fragmented, and there was a part about

blaming Lefille that didn't make sense. The adventurers all blamed her for the appearance of Rajas but, if you think about it carefully, it had no relation to her. The Mazoku came looking for a different person and encountered Lefille coincidentally would be a more convincing story. It just happened that everyone panicked and didn't recover from the shock of being attacked by the Mazoku, and an easy target to cast the blame on just happened to be nearby. It was a result of a series of unfortunate coincidence.

Not everyone could keep their cool and judgement, without someone like that around, being forced into a corner will result in this happening most of the time.

However, Lefille didn't seem convinced.

"However, they actually divert some of their forces into Aster when they were still in a standoff with Thoria and various other western nations. That could only mean..."

"What, you think the Mazoku diverted some of their forces just for you? You seem awfully confident in your own power."

"Wa, I'm speaking seriously though? Don't make fun of me please!"

"Heh heh, my bad my bad. True, Lefille is strong."

Suimei apologized for his joke and flattered Lefille's strength. But Lefille responded in a sharp tone with an unhappy expression for some reason.

"... It feels as if I am being toyed around like a fool."

"No such thing. Didn't Lefille cleave the opponent I had a hard time fighting in two easily?"

That was Suimei's true feelings in the battle a little ago. But, Lefille still had something on her mind. There was a word or two she wanted to say. But Suimei ignored that and continued what he was saying.

~~"So, that's right, that tough Mazoku, that thing he said about Lefille being the survivor of Noshias... If I remember right, Noshias was..."~~

Only having inquired a bit about the expression, he was cut off by Lefille's weary voice.

"...You're unfamiliar about the culture of this region, yet you know about it."

"Ahh... well yeahh..."

Suimei thought about it a little, and made a vague response. That reminded him about what his background was suppose to be. Being unfamiliar with common knowledge but having knowledge about international affairs, it was only natural if others found him weird.

Suimei nagged to himself in his head, and Lefille who seemed to have resigned slowly spoke.

"Ah... that's right, it's as he said, I'm a survivor of Noshias."

Lefille revealed her identity she had been hiding all along. She sounded out her confession, and explaining that she was the survivor of the country destroyed by the Mazoku. One couldn't help empathizing with her when listening to her sorrowful voice.

"True, that nation lies on the boundary between the realm of humans and the Mazoku territory, so they were the first to be attacked."

"You know a lot."

"...Well, it was a serious event."

It was the reason why Reiji and they were summoned to this world, how could he forget.

Lefille returned to the topic and affirmed in a forlorn voice.

"...Ahh, since ancient times, Noshias was the barrier keeping out the Mazoku. But it fell in less than a month."

"I heard from someone that it was an army of a million."

"A million troops... I don't know where you heard that but was it true? We haven't seen that number of living beings, so we can't be sure."

Her response was calm and collected. But that roundabout way of putting it seemed to be implying something.

To Suimei who couldn't fully grasp what she said, Lefille's eyes turned sharp, as if she was watching a black and white film.

"It was an ocean. From one end of the horizon to the next, the Mazoku was like an ocean, forming an army of uncountable numbers, attacking us from across the border."

The look that Lefille just had, that impression. Suimei vaguely imagined that, a swallowing noise ringing out, living things advancing like a tsunami, what in the world could it be? The horizon disappearing, and that side being flooded with by a group without human morals. It would be equal to nature's wrath, nay, a greater wickedness since individually they all had purpose. If that were to attack, could humans bear it? As that thought rushed in his head, suddenly Lefille...

"What I saw at the northernmost fortress was, that scene. At that time, I didn't only experience just that much."

"Only that, it was a matter where you were driven with no margin to spare."

"Ahh, it's as you said, we tried with everything we had. We shot at the advancing Mazoku in front of our eyes."

"So, did that tough Mazoku at that time..."

To Suimei's vague question, Lefille returned a nod of affirmation.

"Rajas. He was after that. After collecting the survivors and retreating, he was left with the task of fighting. It's also as you heard previously, He seemed to be one of the seven Demon Generals."

"I guess, he was saying something like that."

To Lefille's words, he remembered Rajas' speech; He said he was one of the beings entrusted with an army by Nakshatra.

"Seven of them huh"

"Ahh, that time also, in the midst of the fight, I remember I heard him say that. I also don't understand in detail but he boasted that the seven armies were divided into three regiments."

"Three. And considering that there could be over one million then, if they join together what do we do..."

It was getting increasingly unpleasant of a talk.

He hadn't experienced something like that, but Suimei's tone hinted that he'd had his share of hardships. By simply multiplying one million by three, there would be three times the numbers. But if Lefille's story is to be completely believed, then it can't be thought of so simply. With such a number and the Mazoku being non-humans, pushing this burden onto the handful of summoned heroes was asking for the impossible. Suimei himself was also in this world but, as expected if the world was hoping on the heroes to defeat them then the future is doubtful.

"So, at that time, the me who fought Rajas, my legs and hands couldn't

face his power. The army was also in disarray, and after that, I, at that female Mazoku..."

There was an unfamiliar word in what Lefille just said. Suimei casually asked concerning that.

"Female Mazoku? Is there such a thing?"

"No.. it's nothing. So then...The reason why Noshias was the first to be targeted, was probably not just because of its geographical location."

That was the core of the story hinted at by splitting and coming here with the army. Moreover, without saying so, Suimei who knew a bit about it also had that belief.

"The spirit right?"

"Spirit?"

"Ahh, it's about the power Lefille has. It's what they call it from where I'm from. Spirit."

"Are there other people who have a power like mine in the east?"

"Uhh, not quite like Lefille's, but I guess they are in the same category."

"...?"

Suimei didn't quite know what to call it himself, but Lefille was even more confused. Of course. Most likely, this world had a different definition of spirits compared to the other world. This world, like the other world, the power of humans were much weaker than that of nature and mysterious origin. First of all, without the foundational knowledge gained from the research of multiple magic, the information this world had of spirits were pitifully limited. Hence, they probably didn't understand what kind of an

existence spirits were.

Lefille paused, trying to digest and understand what Suimei said, but in the end, without an answer, continued back on topic.

"I don't really know what to call it, but it's as you said, we call upon spirits. My country, since long ago, called upon that power in response to the Mazoku."

"That reminds me, you said that your swordsmanship was also handed down over generations, is that also?"

"Aa. My ancestors were an existence that was born between spirits and humans. In order for humans to resist the Mazoku, the goddess Alshuna arranged it. This swordsmanship was also born then, and it has helped the heroes who have called on that power as well."

"Heroes, seriously?"

To the unexpected mention of the word in Lefille's story, Suimei muttered quietly. It couldn't be, Lefille's ancestors were the ones who became the power of the called upon heroes long ago. And now, instead of being with the heroes, the descendants were with him, what kind of twisted karma is that? One can't help but think that some unknown entity is toying with them.

Thereupon, Lefille's facial expression showed loneliness and sadness.

"I also thought that I wanted to protect people, to save people. But ultimately, that dream ended. And now I'm in this sorry state."

Saying that, Lefille cast her eyes down dejectedly. After running away from her homeland, becoming an adventurer, being constantly slandered, she tasted loneliness. On top of that personal history, her dreary heart

called for help. Yearning and yearning for that unfulfilled dream, her last face was one of a girl betrayed by reality. That, was certainly there. The wish to protect, the wish to save others, nothing but pure honest craving, denying any ill will, that unreasonable wish that was snatched away, she had that kind of heartbreaking face.

She had power. That's why, she made the best of it. For someone. But, she couldn't do anything no matter what. Like she was trying to get some kind of recompense. Nay, if she did it, even now she, to that sense...

"Hey, Lefille. Mazoku... what in the world are they?"

Despite the look in her eyes saying she wanted to get away from the topic, Lefille suddenly answered the question.

"Hm huh. To be honest, I don't really know. Most likely, there's nobody in the world who really knows about them. Aside from the little in stories handed down from since long ago, there's probably no way to get information about the Mazoku."

"And that 'little in stories?'"

"In those olden days, the evil god that fought with Alshuna... was what was said before. That evil god who boasted of enormous power, in the end was driven to the dimensional threshold by Alshuna, the elements, and the spirits."

"Ah"

Suimei agreed. It concurred with what he'd learned during a previous trip. In general he remembered the story, most likely her calling it the space between worlds is what the exterior world is called here, the other world is at the cavity at that threshold, the world's edge. Seeing Suimei

nod in affirmation, Lefille continued.

"It was said that the Mazoku were the servants of that evil god. Accepting the evil god's divine blessing, in the chaos of just the strife and death, they filled this world."

Chaos, an incredible term came up. No, it was already an incredible topic when the evil god is involved. In the end, the result of the devil worship, had the same intention as the evil gods of the outer worlds. Then, next is...

"You said divine protection but, then the origin of that power of the Mazoku is the evil god?"

"Ahh, that reminds me, I have a feeling that that theory does also exist. I also don't remember well but..."

"Hmm.."

"What's wrong? Suimei-kun"

"Mazoku... what they are. I have my own theory."

"Fumu. Your thinking eh? Interesting."

"Do you want to hear it?"

"Yeah because as it is I do have an interest in it"

...is what she said but what he was thinking was pretty admirable. Lefille was laughing with sheer admiration. However, that face was honestly an interest from the heart, and showed her anticipation. The possibility that he arrived at the truth was improbable. Anyway, about that.

Now then, first...

"Listen, first is, from the definition of the evil god in your story."

Suimei had come into contact with what was known as devils or spirits in his original world. They basically exist in the outer world, a theoretical existence that possessed power similar to that of legends. They could be summoned with spells, given a name and its existence defined. After that, they will appear in the world as devils or spirits.

The spirits defined in the original world were vague without a fixed appearance, just an information like existence. And god— the god here referring to a higher level of existence than spirits— was not just a vague existence like spirits, but a powerful body of information with a will of their own.

In other words the evil god is...

"... The evil god exists in the gaps between dimensions, which is the outer world, and its goal is to fill the world with chaos. Even now, it is watching this place closely from the outer world, hoping to accomplish its goal. But that thing's existence is bounded there, and can't interfere with this world directly like the times of the ancient goddess war. In its place, the Mazoku that serve the evil god inherit its will, and are bestowed with the powers of the evil god they worship, squirming in the dark to fill the world with chaos."

"Muu..."

"Well... it's a cliched story but, that's the script if you think about our earlier conversation. Things started during the beginning of the world, when the seed of future strife was planted... oops"

Whether everything about the Mazoku was like that, he didn't know but, noticing his digression, he went back on topic.

“For practical problems that’s fine but, concerning that puppet Mazoku... that’s it. In the first place his specifications are different, because his body’s strength is different than humans, they followed a different evolutionary path than living beings, or it’s the case that the evil god designed them. Whichever one it is, I don’t know for sure. That’s the impression I got from the story before.”

“That’s a quite interesting conjecture.”

“Thanks. If it’s the case with divine protection then, then I expect that most of their power is the evil god’s. The black energy coming from the Mazoku is that.”

To the concluding Suimei, Lefille slipped in a question.

“...? That’s not a characteristic of the Mazoku?”

“That’s right. It’s not a power that those living creatures carry naturally. The power inconsistent with the world and nature is not produced by that world, it’s the truth that it’s definitely not produced. Nobody would deliberately be harmful to themselves right? The world is the same. That’s why it is useful to depend on existences that cannot exist in the world. This power that runs contrary to the logic of this world can only exist because of the influence of something not of this world. For example, what’s that thing called...”

“Evil god huh.”

“Returning to the conversation, that’s how it is. At the point in time where the Mazoku could use that power, the evil god’s existence was proved. That talk was a pain though.”

Yes, the talk about the Mazoku resulted in a discussion about the evil

god. That said, it took a great amount of trouble to arrive at that.

Anyhow...

"Then, Alshuna is an existence facing the evil god so, this world's humans and demi-humans, from the root of that belief are enemies to the evil god. That's why he tries to kill the living things that don't match his feelings."

"..."

Suimei was holding firm to that belief, and Lefille looked like she was scrutinizing the contents of that discussion, narrowing her eyes. In that face there was some kind of agitation. Choosing the right time, Suimei fired a single word.

"So? Is there another theory you can get from that story?"

"True. That does work in the story. That's the first time I've heard that argument with the evil god and the Mazoku. Based on the current argument, if I rethink the things I said, the legends become plausible."

"It was a pretty interesting argument right?"

"Yeah. Surprising. You've thought about it considerably. Amazing, Suimeikun"

To the girl nodding sincerely, Suimei added in a supplement.

"Incidentally, that humans are able to fight with the Mazoku is because they have Alshuna's divine blessing I think. Excluding Lefille, generally they carry the power of resistances for that purpose. The element hostile to the evil god obviously falls under that category, so sorcerer's magic also has that effect."

“...”

“Yes. That’s why at the time when I was fighting the Mazoku, with the exception of magic that don’t use the elements as an intermediary, physical attacks also were ineffective. Because humans have their faith deeply intertwined with their lives, that power dwells within them. On top of that, the magic of this world is strongly linked to Alshuna and the spirits, the elements also have that power in them, giving them a big effect against the Mazoku. Sorcerers, through that magic with that subtle power, are able to defeat Mazoku. However, on the other hand, there is nobody born in this world like me, who don’t have that relation to the element, are expected to have their power become weak.”

Therefore.

“By the way I’d like to ask, when we fought with the Mazoku earlier, did beginner mage’s magic have effect on the Mazoku?

After asking, Lefille thought for a bit, with knit brows she said in a far off voice.

“Well, the people who showed effectiveness and didn’t were scattered but...”

The sorcerers that were effective were, even if they weren’t using magic from long ago, they perceived a revelation, and they had a connection to the elements so they had effect. People who weren’t effective that was the first time they’d felt that revelation, so their connection to the element was weak and they couldn’t defeat the Mazoku. Is that not it?”

“Ahh, to go that far is...”

“Assuming that, is the story. Well, I think I’m probably right.”

There were few simple parts so it wasn't definite, but he believed in it. Taking into account that Lefille was still piecing things together, generally this response is to be expected.

At any rate the answer came out. Because the Mazoku have the evil god's blessing, basically they have resistances so only the magic here is effective.

However, if that power's source was made to be established in the Mazoku's current form, they are an existence of the underworld, so if you use that class, that magic will show effect.

That magic had effect after all for Suimei, his thoughts until now were because of what happened then.

"Suimei-kun"

"Hmm?"

"Just who are you?"

That casual inquiry came out was because of the talk until now right.

Rather than doubting his true character, she was simply really wondering what it is. To her question, Suimei gave no response.

"Now then. Or maybe I should put it, isn't it about time to find a place to rest?"

"Yeah."

In the darkening forest, Lefille gazed at the deep blue sky while agreeing. Shrugging her shoulders dejectedly, something was amiss, or was it just imagination? With that girl, Suimei once again began to walk.

Part 7

That night after meeting up with Lefille in the forest. Suimei immersed himself in the clear night sky, gazing at the stars of this different world from a boulder with a great view by himself.

“It should be that direction, and...”

With the dark purple darkness as the background, the beautiful stars were spread across the heavens. Looking at the night sky that definitely could not be seen in the polluted modern world, Suimei was divining the correct direction through Astrology. He wasn't familiar with the stars in this different world, but he had stayed in this world for quite some time now, and he had gazed upon the night skies numerous times. He understood the position of the moon and the stars, and could make out the basics such as directions.

However—

(Even if I use them, it's only about this much eh...)

One of the things that kept him from calming down after coming to this world was still troubling him. That's right, as stated before, even if he is able to, Suimei can only divinate this much from the stars in this world. Certainly, by observing the star's spectrum - referring to the rays of light emitted by the stars here - and analyzing them using magic, he could determine which stars had which type of attributes, and it would be possible to utilize them in spells. But the divination that was synonymous with Astrology was done by using the radiance of the most effective stars, which harbours the name of the stars and their meaning, and utilizing the influence of the stars in the most efficient manner. As it was not possible to do this, he couldn't use Astrology to its full potential.

The spell Meteor drop would be a good example. In his original world, as long as the conditions for time and location were fulfilled, it boasted of atrocious magic power. But in this world where he couldn't draw out the powers of mysteries, the best he could do would be less than half the maximum power under normal conditions. With the powerful spells he depended on greatly in combat becoming like this, Suimei couldn't help sighing depressedly.

After finishing his conversation with Lefille about the Mazoku, Suimei and Lefille walked into the depth of the forest to search for a place to make camp.

They encountered a pack of wolves on the way there, but they didn't run into any monsters, and found a water source, and a cave that could keep the cold and humidity away.

The sun had already set half way by then as the day slowly becomes the night. The two of them prepared as fast as possible, and after eating dinner, it was already this late.

Watching the stars, Suimei thought about what would happen hereafter, but he had not decided his course of action yet. Running here because of his emotions was one thing, but what should he do from hence forth? Taking everything into consideration, fighting with the Mazoku called Rajas is probably unavoidable but...

"He said that he'd bring along his comrades huh."

He thought about the demon general Rajas with his huge body, and one of the things he said.

Rajas told Lefille nonchalantly that he will bring his minions along.

Suimei didn't think it would be in the hundreds of thousands like Lefille said, but it was true that they were making some kind of military maneuver. They probably have to steel themselves to fight a large number of enemies.

Therefore, Suimei was vexed that meteor drop couldn't be used. Although it wouldn't be effective unless he used a special kind of spell, just like that time when he used Ashurbanipal's Flame, he would be able to forcefully overwhelm the Mazoku with brute power. He felt disheartened his powerful wide area attack won't be at full power.

As Suimei was sighing in lamentation.

"Hmm? Lefille?"

When did she come out from the cave? In Suimei's vision, the beautiful figure of Lefille who was dressed in a knight's attire headed off somewhere. Lefille walked unsteadily as if she was sleepwalking, heading into the depths of the forest like a puppet controlled by strings.

... Where was she going this late in the night without even a weapon? Suimei couldn't fathom what the swordswoman was thinking. After eating dinner, she said she was tired and retired early. With the fight against the Mazoku, the dispute with the caravan and dealing with the pack of wolves, she should have accumulated a lot of fatigue. That should be so, but what was she trying to do now?

"If I remember correctly, that way is..." That's right, the place Lefille was going to was the water source. It was a somewhat high place that had a brook and could have a small waterfall. However, the cave they currently were in already had enough water so there was no need to go over there

right?

"..."

There was an uneasy feeling in the air. Suimei rubbed the back of his neck, feeling an uneasy premonition.

Lefille and that shaky way of walking, it didn't seem normal. Moreover, she wasn't carrying a weapon that normally would be necessary in the forest. Something was happening. In that case, it's better to chase after her. With that thought in mind, Suimei jumped off the boulder and chased after Lefille into the forest.

Cutting through the thickets and weaving between the trees, he delved into the forest. Soon, he arrived at the water source. As he was about to step out of the bushes in front of the water source to search for the girl, he slipped on something like a piece of cloth.

"What's this?"

It was a close call. If he hadn't noticed, then like the time when he was summoned to this world, he would have fallen on his ass. To ascertain what he just stepped on, Suimei picked it up and spread it out. And realized what it was.

"Eh..."

Suimei made a confused sound unconsciously and his mind blanked. With a stupid looking face that anyone would have seeing that, he held it up and realized it was... clothes. The things that people wear, that you put on... in short, clothes. What's more, they were clothes that Suimei found familiar. He had seen these just a little ago when he was on the boulder, the knight clothes Lefille was wearing.

"Uhh.. wait a sec... this is..."

Confused and flustered, Suimei stammered to himself, unable to form proper sentences because of that thing spread out before him. Confusion and panic made him even more anxious, making Suimei stutter even more. After looking carefully, he affirmed that women's underwear were also there. In other words, Lefille currently is not wearing her clothes and underwear, meaning that...

"That girl is naked right now..."

After a bit, Suimei grasped the situation completely and fell into a dull state. He knew exactly what the clothes and underwear meant on the ground meant. Suimei processed it with his mind as if it was in a way the procedure to summon devils. So, without any extraneous intentions, he glanced over towards a certain direction, as if he was guided by invisible strings. And just as he thought, there was a stark naked Lefille over by the waterside.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Suimei cried out in his head while suppressing his emotions. Of course, those emotions were those of shame. The feeling of unease that made his neck felt strange earlier, he wondered why he felt that way back then. Suimei was filled with regrets for allowing his emotions to lead him to this place.

Even though it was a misunderstanding, but from the perspective of a third party, it would seem like he came here with the intend to peek on a girl bathing. If someone was to see him right now, he would definitely be labeled a pervert.

No, instead of that, he should...

"No, don't look Suimei. You can't look! Well truthfully I kinda want to see but... that's not it! Just forget everything. Forget everything, me! Just forget it all and turn back..."

That's right, with a red face, Suimei was denying something in his head.

With his ability to think calmly being completely gone, Suimei fell into confusion.

He doesn't have any plans to watch carefully and burn this scene deeply into his eyes. Suimei couldn't deal with these kinds of situation as most of his head was devoted to magic. Together with his serious character, terms like large and bountiful, exceptional figure, beautiful proportions had been purged from his mind as if these terms were sworn enemies.

At that time, Suimei suddenly heard a voice.

"...Aa...ku...e..."

"Eh?"

The air quivered and Suimei breathed weakly. Forgetting about situation, he let out a sound in surprise. Just now, to his ears, he thought he heard something indicating distress. Something like moaning or gasping, like the voice of a girl in pain or someone burning up with a fever.

Is this not merely a bath? Remembering the gasping, Suimei looked once more. Glancing in that direction, he saw Letile leaning on a boulder near the water's edge. Looking closely, there was a strange look in her eyes. Rather than bathing, she appeared unconscious and suffering in the water. Why was she groaning? What was making her wheeze in anguish? At that time, Suimei saw it. On her abdomen, there was an ominous tattoo that seemed to be encroaching onto the girl.

"...Ah"

Unaffected, he realized what was going on the moment he saw the tattoo. Her raised arm, her sudden voice, the eyes that saw her, his own conveniently bashful heart, all of it vanished with astonishment.

A curse.

As soon as he realized this, all the superfluous things he had thought up until now vanished. Why? As he got a hold of himself, instead of the confidence that he could deal with it, his heart sank with helpless thoughts, that here as well, there were girls in pain because of a curse.

A curse. Yes, a curse. It is the first time he had seen one like that, but he probably wasn't wrong. The tattoo on Lefille's abdomen was proof of it. The dark red overlapping lines were blemishing her white beautiful skin. Another world's curse. Whenever the tattoo pulsed because of magic, Lefille's moan grew in intensity, and her body squirmed from the pain. Then who, with what intention, would have done such a curse?

"...Tsch"

In Suimei's mouth was an overwhelming bitterness. This was the feeling of someone who knew curses very well. An embodiment of hatred from Suimei, as someone who had deep dealings with someone who cursed others, and someone who was cursed.

That's right, there was a time when Suimei wished that he could break a curse. The girl that suffered in grief because of the ruinous curse was there. That's why he studied curses for a time in order to break them. He couldn't forgive the existence of such an unreasonable misfortune in this world.

Therefore, what was happening to the girl in front of his eyes was painful to watch to him as well. That impure movement, it was intolerable.

That's a curse huh. It's vulgar. And against a young girl, how heretical.

Sorrow. That noble girl imprisoned by the curse and compelled to perform such obscene acts. There was no other way to describe this other than sadness.

Why did the curse have to dirty pure girls?

Why was the curse burned onto girls?

Why did curses always make girls cry in anguish

Fuelled by fury, Suimei's heart burned with anger. And with those thoughts, he approached the rock where the girl was.

"Lefille"

As if he wanted to just talk to her, Suimei gently tapped the shoulders of the girl panting in pain.

Lefille looked up with blurry eyes, probably recovering her consciousness a little.

"Ah, uh...?"

The face that was lifted because of the voice still showed signs of the curse's influence and was red with confusion.

"Ah..."

Lefille finally realized someone was calling out to her, and made a sound that she was aware. But as she stared into the eyes of the man who had a wavering look of pity, the girl's pupils reflect despair like never before.

As they looked at each other, Lefille's face gradually became twisted. Why are you here. Why are you looking? I didn't want anybody to see my disgraceful sight. Lefille's pained expression seemed to be screaming.

.

However, even after noticing another person's presence, she didn't stop as if her actions were forced by an unseen power. Because of the curse's fever, she had no control over her body and she continued to rub herself against the rock to relieve the fever a little.

"Ahh... ahhh..."

Yes, from the perspective of a third party, it was a seductive action as if

she couldn't help soothing the fire within her.

"No... please, don't look... please..."

Lefille's faint voice now was not because of the painful fever. It was a plea from a girl in pain, who didn't want anyone to see her indecent side.



After some time, the curse's effect seemed to fade, and she calmed down. To Lefille, who was on the ground putting on the knights clothes he had brought, Suimei quietly asked about the curse.

"Is it a curse?"

He asked to confirm. And as expected, Lefille nodded without looking at him. When Suimei was about to ask again, Lefille who was lowering her head with depressed eyes suddenly said:

"I am..."

"..."

"... I am someone related to the royal family of Noshias... No, Noshias is gone, I should say that I was someone related to them."

Lefille looked down and sighed. It was a sigh as if she was mocking herself, as the girl continued her monologue depressedly. Lefille then continued:

"The Noshias royal family— as a branch family, the bloodline of spiritual power run in my clan. Because I was born with powerful spiritual powers, I was raised with the goal of protecting Noshias from early on. Day after day, I practiced my swordsmanship and ways to use my spiritual powers just to protect my homeland from the Mazoku that would attack from the north."

Lefille then turned towards Suimei to confirm something.

"In the day, I told you that Noshias was defeated by the Mazoku right?"

"...Yeah..."

"Back then... about half a year ago, the northernmost fortress entrusted to us was stamped out by the hordes of Mazoku. And I was separated with the comrades that fought alongside me. By the time we fought at the capital, there were only a few people left."

It was a harsh memory, and her voice oozed with pain. And yet, Lefille, as if she had to talk, continued on.

"The Mazoku's attack was terrifyingly fast. There wasn't even time for the citizens to escape out of the country. The Mazoku controlled the majority of the country in no time. By that point, we had almost no means to resist. Normally, a summoning for a hero would also be done, but it was

too late. They could only call on my power, but my strength was futile against the Mazoku army. Due to the overwhelming differences in numbers and resources, our army renowned for being elite was also crushed. In the end, in order to show the Mazoku our resolve, the people of Noshias chose to defend the city until the very end.”

Making a last stand. In the first place, there was no option to run. Because of the pride of the northern people, they wouldn’t yield to the Mazoku, and struggled to the end to not let the Mazoku do as they wanted.

However—

“While everyone else was preparing for the last time, I was given a different task. I wasn’t allowed to die in the siege because of the spirit’s power. The spirit’s power could not be allowed to die out, and so, I was not permitted to fight until the end at the castle. As a result of this power, my father, my mother, my friends, everyone that was important to me, I had to run and abandon it all.”

This must have been the greatest regret in her life, and Lefille’s shoulders hung with regret.

Suimei was born in modern Japan, and would firstly be happy about being alive in such a situation. But for the people of this world who live for the sake of battle and took pride in the duty passed down by their ancestors, this situation was probably unbearable. For someone who was bestowed with more spiritual powers than power, this was even more true.

“It was in the middle of that. I got cursed. While escaping to other

countries, I fought with the Mazoku, and then...”

“It’s that guy...?”

“...No, not Rajas. The one who cursed me was a female Mazoku commanding Rajas and the army. That Mazoku seemed to specialize in curses. What her intention was, I don’t know, but in that fight where I was fighting with everything on the line, she cursed me as if it was child's play. It feels as if insects creep onto me, and I have to comfort myself in that indecent way.”

That was everything. Lefille who was bound helplessly. Regarding the curse, that was the whole story. Her feelings of revenge, the matter of the curse, she had a lot of things weighing down on her.

At that point, Suimei suddenly noticed something about Lefille’s curse and what had happened earlier.

“Could it be, that at the inn and ...”

“Ahh, you remembered. That’s right. That night, I also searched for a place with water like this too. In the morning, when I woke up, I tried to avoid others and ran back to the inn. After that, it’s as you remember, I ran into you.”

Suimei continued asking.

“Do you know what causes the curse to activate?”

“When I utilize a lot of the spirit’s power, it becomes like this. Earlier I did the guild request for the subjugation of the monsters, and that's why.”

“And the cure to the curse?”

“I tried. I couldn’t do anything as I am not a mage, but even a prestigious

priest from the Church of Salvation couldn't do anything."

Then, has she always been this way? Without a cure, without a way to suppress the curse, having to unconsciously deal with the curse without being found.

As if confirming it, Lefille stayed silent in despair, and then after a while, quietly laughed as if debasing herself.

"Fufufu..."

"Lefille?"

"Fucking laugh at me. At this girl. At the one with this vile curse.

This...this..."

Saying that, Lefille grabbed Suimei by the collar. The girl holding him by the collar and laughing at herself. Unable to stand the truth, she forced herself to laugh in order to cast away her sorry state, but her stare was full of despair.

"It's funny isn't it! Held captive by the spirit's power, me who had to abandon the people who fought to the end, it's divine punishment! "I want to protect everyone with this power," what bullshit. Right?!? Not in this story. Being cursed, living in disgrace because I can't die..."

Divine punishment huh. That self condemnation, surely that absurdity is just the lamentation of the heart. Why can she laugh at that. In this world, where such pain is a common occurrence, why laugh? In those tears of despair, there was nothing funny.

"But this power protected Lefille before."

"I... That's true... I was, protected by it."

"That's the truth. So don't look down on yourself too much."

"But I ran. I still ran, even though I don't want to abandon anyone."

"Lefille..."

Suimei cast his eyes downwards, and the girl who couldn't suppress her sobbing let go of Suimei's collar.

Finally, Lefille's shoulders trembled and she said:

"After my homeland is destroyed, to be left and cursed to sooth my wretched self in that way. Is there anything more miserable than this..."

Her homeland and people close to her were lost, and she was inflicted with this shameful curse on top of that. There was nothing more terrible for a woman. The sight of her tugged at his heart, and Suimei grabbed the shoulders of the tearing Lefille.

"Lefille. I'm sorry, I'm going to be a bit rude."

"Ah..."

And then, removing her soaked jacket, he exposed her naked skin.

"Ahh, no..."

"..."

Lefille probably sensed danger when she was touched. Tightly closing her eyes, she made a stiff sound. The powerful swordswoman who fought the Mazoku bravely was nowhere to be found. Ignoring the girl who was frightened of men, he touched the cursed mark on her skin.

"Correspondence."

What he had used was an analysis magic. He materialized a small version

of the cursed mark on Lefille's body onto his hand, and studied its composition. From the magic circle spreading out from his palm, the information of the spell structure flowed into his mind. Because of the actions it forced her to do, it was not a natural curse. As for classification, it was something similar to Sympathetic Magic. Suimei understood that much, but even for him who had modern magical knowledge, he couldn't figure out the cure.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sympathetic_magic>

While grinding his teeth, Suimei infused some magic into his hand to apply a relieving magic.

"Uuu, gu...ahh"

For a bit, Lefille's pained voice became calmer and soothed. After the girl's breathing became steady, Suimei asked:

"How is the burning sensation?"

"Ahh... it's considerably better.. That was...?"

"A magic of mine that reduces the effect of the curse. With this it's a bit better right?"

"Is that so. Up until now nobody could do something like that..."

A voice of relief. Yet, this made Suimei feel a sense of guilt . In the end, while he could interfere with the curse, that was only a temporary solution.

"Sorry. While I can temporarily weaken the curse, I don't have a way to get rid of it. This curse wasn't just simply casted onto Lefille's body. That's why, until we find the caster or the medium used to cast it, the

curse won't be broken."

Saying that, Suimei bowed his head in disappointment.

The curse cast on Lefille was one utilizing Sympathetic magic.

Sympathetic magic, along with contact magic, was a way of classifying curses as popularized by England's anthropologist and occultist, James George Frazer. He believes that there were invisible connections between objects that had similar shape on the theoretical level, an idea grounded on mutual influence. Using this mysterious connection one could achieve the amplification of curses.

This type used an imitation of a person, such as a doll or a photo, to cast the spell on a person. A cursed doll in Japan and voodoo doll from Haiti were such examples. His findings indicate that the curse on Lefille probably belonged to this category. As it wasn't known what the medium was, or what the relationship the one who was cursed had with this medium, it was difficult to break such a spell.

"Sorry, this is everything I can do."

"...It's fine. Thanks."

Suimei realized his helplessness only when he faced a curse he couldn't undo. As she watched Suimei who apologized with such feelings, Lefille made a smile while holding back her pain.

After a while, drop by drop, tears flowed down Lefille's face. In the forest in the middle of nowhere, like when the rain begins, her tears fell.

"Uuuuu..."

Only Lefille knew how it felt. As an outsider, Suimei had a sympathetic expression with his mouth open, as if he was trying to say something.

But, there probably were nothing he could say. No matter how much he thought, he wasn't qualified to wipe away her tears of despair and give her solace.

To Lefille who looked as if she would cry endlessly, Suimei could not utter a word.

Part 8



A few days after the night when Suimei found out Lefille's curse. Being vigilant of dangerous beasts and monsters, especially the Mazokus, the two of them watch their surroundings carefully and had yet to exit the forest.

And so today, the two of them also had a simple lunch after following the river to a slightly open space.

The food from the magic bag and river water cleanse by magic were laid out. Lefille chewed on a hard piece of bread and pointed at a certain bottle.

"Suimei-Kun, can you please pass me the honey?"

"Ahh, here."

"Much thanks."

Suimei passed the bottle of honey to Lefille, who spread it on her bread while thanking him.”

Facing the girl who was biting into her bread once again, Suimei said:

“Hey, Lefille.”

“Hmm, this bread is hard. Suimei-kun, it would be better to soak it in water when you eat it.”

“Ahh, I know, I wasn’t talking about that.”

“Don’t worry, the honey is quite sweet, mixing in a bit of water won’t affect its taste.”

“.....”

Suimei-kun shut his mouth as Lefille kept talking about her own thing. After the incident that day, she had been this way. She must be thinking of something, intentionally avoiding meaningful conversation with others. She kept interrupting Suimei, so the two didn’t have a proper conversation.

As expected, she became like this after that incident...

Yes, after her secret was found out, it wasn’t strange for Lefille finding it hard to face Suimei.

But--

“Hey Lefille.”

“... What is it, Suimei-kun? If it is about food, I don’t need any more alright? I have enough, or do you want me to take something for you?”

“No, not that... there’s honey on your cheeks.”

Lefille yelped in surprise when she heard Suimei, and wiped her cheeks hard, and glared at Suimei with accusatory eyes.

"C-Can't you tell me earlier... Why is there honey..."

"Ahh, actually there isn't any on your cheeks."

Suimei replied nonchalantly, and Lefille stood up in anger.

"W-Why you! Are you toying with me!?"

"Sort of. Because of someone, we couldn't talk properly, so I thought this was a good chance."

"Ughh... This is..."

"... Hey Lefille. We are moving together, so we need to communicate more alright? Didn't you say this before? If we could talk harmoniously, our teamwork will become better."

"....."

Her attitude that was like an act earlier changed all of a sudden, and the girl lowered her head in sorrow, with melancholy in her eyes. But there wasn't anything to gain in maintaining this status quo.

"Erm... How should I put this. I know things are awkward after that incident. I feel a bit embarrassed too, it might be a little difficult, but we should do our best to better our relationship."

"That's enough, Suimei-kun. I am thankful for your concern, but please don't bother with me."

"Lefille."

Suimei showed a lonely expression. Her effort in repairing their relationship had been shattered by her rejection.

"This is a good opportunity, so I will make this clear. You shouldn't be here with me."

"... Shouldn't be with you is..."

"If you are involved with me, you will suffer misfortune too. So keep your relations with me to the bare minimum."

Lefille fell silent after saying her piece, her eyes filled with sadness as she thought about something. No, the people she failed to protect must be reflected in her eyes. Seeing the wavering sorrow in Lefille's eyes, Suimei could feel the pain she was suffering.

"Everyone related to me are no longer of this world. So if you continue to be with me, you will be killed by Rajas or the Mazoku one day. I am tired of seeing people dying because of me. So—"

"Don't decide my future of being killed by Mazoku for me."

"No, it's inevitable. Mazoku are powerful beings, not an existence that could be dealt with easily. And if things go badly, I will definitely abandon you. In order to preserve the powers of the spirits, I had to abandon everyone close to me and flee, I have enough of that already."

"....."

Suimei fell silent with a serious face. Lefille lowered her eyes and said with a pleading expression:

I know that I am being willful. But can you promise me this? After exiting the forest, we will go our separate ways. Please."

"That's too hasty. I don't think I need to decide on an answer so early right?"

"Even if you say that—"

Just when Lefille was lowering her head because of what Suimei said.

Rustling sound could be heard from the bushes behind them.

"— Suimei-kun!"

"Yeah."

Lefille whirled around while calling out a warning, and Suimei did the same in with a grunt. From behind they could sense a vague presence like that of a wandering spirit, was its identity a wild dog or jackals? Monsters or Mazoku?

Preparing for a possible assault, Suimei raised his alertness to the maximum. Instantly, the atmosphere grew tense as if it was filled with thorns. However, it was something that completely betrayed their expectations.

What came out of the bushes, was a heavily injured person.

"He--Help."

"...?!?"

"He, hey!"

The appearance of that unexpected person filled Suimei and Lefille were surprised. What appeared was a man dressed like an adventurer. With an unsteady gait, blank eyes, torn clothes with blood everywhere, his body was full of lacerations and burns. All that could be heard was a dying whisper and wheezing as faint as the wind.

Severely wounded, he came here like that. Because of the wounds his consciousness was fading. Lefille rushed up to him.

"Hang in there!"

"Ahh, gu... you..."

"What the hell happened?"

"The Mazoku... we came across them... in the mountains."

"Mountains? Mazoku?"

They only caught a couple of words from his speech. As Lefille's face turned grave, Suimei noticed something and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hey. Lefille. This man."

"What about him?"

"He was an adventurer from that time."

"That time? Oh..."

She suddenly raised her voice in realization. Lefille must have also realized. Because of the numerous wounds and the excessive bleeding, she didn't notice at first, but it was the guard who was the loudest at the time when she was kicked out of the caravan group.

Did he run all the way here alone after he was attacked by the Mazoku? Or did he come for help? It could be for either purpose, but regardless, it will be terrible leaving him like this.

Suimei gathered mana in his palms and gave instructions to Lefille.

"Lefille. Put him down. I'll use healing magic."

"Ahh. Understood."

Lefille hesitated for a moment, but understood the gravity of the situation and laid the man down onto the ground as per Suimei's instructions.

The girl who was walking an earnest path didn't seem to harbour any resentment.

"Please."

"Yeah."

To those words, Suimei nodded and started casting healing magic on the man. If he wasn't on the verge of death, his method should be able to heal him. For physical wounds, spirit magic was effective. Negative symptoms from the excessive loss of blood couldn't be avoided, but that could be cured with restorative magic too.

Under the adventurer was a magic formation of the same color as the magic coming from Suimei's hand. With a faintly rising emerald color, the adventurer's wound gradually closed up.

However.

"..."

At that point, Suimei stopped.

Halfway through treatment, Suimei silently looked at the adventurer and put down the hand supplying the treatment.

"Huh...?"

To that, Lefille was visibly bewildered. As far as she could tell, he had abandoned the treatment halfway through. To Suimei who had lowered his hand, Lefille raised her voice in urgency.

"Suimei-kun! What happened? Why did you stop?!?"

"...It's impossible. The Astral Body has been irreversibly exhausted. No matter how much we heal this man, it's useless."

Can't be done. Can't be cured. Impossible to heal. However, to Lefille who had just seen the wounds close, this explanation probably wouldn't make any sense.

Having seen the physical wounds heal, it was natural for Lefille to doubt this explanation.

"D-Didn't you see that? Weren't his wounds just healed? That doesn't seem meaningless. So why?..."

"The wounds did close. However..."

"Then..."

He should be able to be healed, is what she wanted him to say. But Suimei, with a bitter face while grinding his teeth, interrupted those words with a shake of his head.

Lefille who saw that had a face filled with questions.

"Why...?"

Lefille's disappointment was painful. A sense of helplessness was probably tumbling around in her heart. Even if the other person was someone she'd hated before, the bitterness Lefille felt wouldn't stop.

Lefille, however, was suspicious that Suimei had stopped for another reason.

"Suimei-kun. It can't be that you stopped treatment because this man was the one who kicked me out of the group? Don't look down on me. I don't care what happened back then. So hurry up and continue the treatment!"

"..."

"Suimei-kun!"

"It's no good. It's true that it's as Lefille saw, I can heal the wounds. However, it's also as I said. The astral body, in other words, the soul and its vessel, the psyche shell, has been worn away. No matter how much he is treated, he won't survive for long."

"What... it can't be..."

Watching the man whose life would disappear like fly, Lefille had no words. To her, Suimei regretfully added on.

"No matter how much he is treated, nothing can be done about another person's soul."

"...Is it really impossible?"

"Under the proper conditions, there might be a one in ten thousand chance that it can be done. However, we have no time for that. Even if we were to prepare for it right now, his body wouldn't be able to last."

"...Tch"

After hearing Suimei's diagnosis, Lefille bit her lips, her neck and shoulders slouched. No matter who it was, it was disheartening to see someone who was about to die. If the Mazoku was the cause of this, the feeling would be more intense and suffocating for the girl who swore to fight the Mazoku.

... The two of them fell into sadness. The man then turned towards Lefille.

"T-The others... Are under attack, by the Mazoku."

"There are survivors!?"

"Don't... Know. But, maybe..."

"There might be someone who is still alive!?"

But there wasn't any response to the girl's query.

To get as much air into his lungs as possible, the adventurer dressed man gasped his lips desperately, and couldn't even make a sound. Seeing him like this, Lefille seemed to have thought of something and asked quietly:

"... Are the others on the mountain?"

Was there any meaning to this question? The girl sounded too calm, it might even cause others to misunderstand that she was being cold. In reply to this question that might give others the chill, the man nodded slowly.

The next instant, the man stopped breathing.

"— Tch."

"....."

Lefille made an inhuman noise when the man died, while Suimei lowered his face.

... And finally, the kneeling Lefille stood and turned her back towards Suimei. The direction she was facing—

"... Hey, Lefille?"

Suimei asked, but Lefille kept her back towards him for some reason, and uttered words of apology.

"I am sorry, Suimei-kun."

"Sorry about what, what are you going to do? Why are you facing that way?"

"Do you even need to ask..."

Isn't that obvious— No, it was indeed something anyone could work out. Because right now, she was facing in a direction of a road they had never taken before.

In the end, Lefille seemed to have made up her mind. She turned towards Suimei, and stated her resolve with determination.

"Suimei-kun, I will be rescuing the people from the caravan."

"Rescue them? Are you serious?"

"Yes, I have no plans on making jokes."

"You are going even though you don't even know where exactly the caravan is!?"

"They are probably along the mountain path. Even if they deviate from the route, it wouldn't be for too far."

"But there was no way of telling if they are still alive!"

"That's right. But someone might still be alive. That's why—"

That's why she was going, in order help them, and performed a rescue that could only be said to be reckless. However, she mustn't, she absolutely mustn't go there, because—

"Do you understand!? This is the trap of the Mazoku to lure you over!"

"A trap, huh?"

"Yes! They are a bunch that assault people without a second thought! Will they allow someone who is heavily injured to run away!? If you go, you will definitely find Rajas waiting for you!"

That's correct, this is a trap. An evil trap to bait Lefille, with the knowledge that she will rush over to save the caravan. They allowed this

man on the verge of death to escape because they knew how Lefille will react after meeting him.

It was a coincidence that this adventurer came to this place in the secluded forest, but the chances that he was released as bait was high. It wouldn't be a surprise to find Rajas waiting for Lefille when she rushed over to rescue the caravan.

However, Lefille didn't listen to what Suimei said, the girl answered in a calm tone.

"... Probably."

"What do you mean by probably... You should know this is true, Lefille!"

"Yes, that's true. It's like you said. I understand how reckless this is."

"In that case...!!"

"However!! ... Even so, I still want to save everyone! Because of me, everyone is in danger! All because of me! That's why!"

Lefille's emotions burst forth as she faced Suimei who couldn't accept her actions. It was probably the anxiety that had been accumulating in her heart all this while. Her feelings of wanting to help others and the thinking that she had to go were conveyed in her words. But she was just beating herself up too much over this.

"Like I told you, it's not Lefille's fault..."

"No, this is my fault. You said it just now right? This man only appeared here because of the trap the Mazoku laid out for me. Rajas only did this because I hid my tracks."

"That... But even if you go, you will just die in vain!"

That was the truth. The opponent's ambush wasn't something so simple. It was a plan made in mind for the enemy that would be coming. For the one who jumps in, it would definitely be at a disadvantage.

That's why Suimei refuse to give in, and tried to talk Lefille, whose back was towards him, out of this.

"Lefille! Think over it carefully! Calm down and think it through!"

But Lefille didn't turn back—

"Lefille!! Come back!! You know in your heart it's true!"

"....."

"Lefille!! Didn't you say you mustn't die!? To keep the power of the spirits from dying out! In that case—"

When Suimei was saying that, Lefille who was enduring silently spoke.

"What do you..."

"Hmm?"

"What do you understand about me!?"

"— Ugh!?"

The girl yelled from the bottom of her heart to stop Suimei. She then poured out the feelings in her heart like a torrent.

"You are telling me to pretend I didn't see that even after all that!? I abandoned the people most dear to me! Even my closest family! Even so, you still want me to throw the people who got into danger because of me away!?"

Lefille's words reverberated in Suimei's ears and heart.

Is this thought and feelings weighing down her heart all this while? No one could help her from the pain, no one could save her. She couldn't restrain her thoughts and screamed, because she earnestly wished to save these people. If that was so, what would Suimei have to do to calm her out of control emotions?

"So I just need to keep running!? Keep ignoring others and leave them to die!? Because I have to cherish my own life!? My thinking resulted in people losing their lives! This kind of thing... I have enough of this!"

Lefille seemed to be roaring at the mercilessness of the world. It was the cry of a girl who couldn't vent all this while. That's right, because she had been betraying her emotions, her self reproach became even more painful. It was even more so, if the feelings she had been going against was the right one. Because of her strong conviction, her self reproach was even more unbearable.

And then, tears came out from the corner of Lefille's eyes after her emotions burst forth.

The tears were filled with sorrow and suffering. It was the crystallization of a girl imprisoned by her responsibility and obligations.

... And finally, she calmed down and her breathing became steady. Lefille apologized for losing her composure and turned back once more. Without looking back, she bided farewell as if it was forever.

"... I am sorry, Suimei-kun. It was for a short time, but I have been in your care."

"Lefille!? Don't go!! Wait!!"

The voice persuading her to stay didn't reach the girl, and disappeared

futilely into the air. Lefille ignored Suimei's restraint, and started running with abnormal speed along the way they came with her crimson spirit powers.

"Hey. She really left..."

The mutters of Suimei who was left behind echoed in the forest. His voice couldn't reach Lefille anymore.

He halted his legs chasing her, and lowered his outreached arm. Suimei stood stiffly on the spot.

She left just like that, to help those who cursed and chased her away. And also to forge ahead in the path she believes to be just.

"Tch..."

This fact made Suimei grit his teeth.

Was it fine for her to go like this? To a battle alone, where only despair waits.

Then chase her, Suimei thought. But if he went too, his life would be endangered. And of course, he would need to fight that Mazoku Rajas and his minions. It would be a brutal fight, and he might even die.

But he mustn't die, He had his reasons. Suimei had to fulfill his father's wish, and realize the ideal of the Association. He had already sworn to do so. Even if the one who made him swore was no longer amongst the living, even if this was decided one sidedly, an oath was still an oath. Once decided, he won't give up until he fulfilled the promise. But would things be fine like this? If he accepted this, and use the excuse that he had things he needed to accomplish, he could move on and walk on his safe route. Could he ignore the battle that would be breaking out soon?

And leave the girl to walk the path without salvation?

That's right—

— The topic of his research was to save those who couldn't find salvation. If he abandoned someone like that so he could continue his research, wouldn't that be putting the cart before the horse?

He saw the contradiction in his introspection, and that voice echoed in his mind.

When did he start fearing death so much? When did he start to fear the unknown, and hesitate in stepping forward? When did he become so weak and cowardly, like those without power?

And so, he thought about it carefully. What was the power he possessed. He had been working hard to learn magic that surpass all the powerful mages since he was young. Didn't the mystic exist in order to solve all the problems in the world? Wasn't this the power that existed in order to not leave anyone who couldn't reach salvation behind?

... The dilemma in his heart was wavering. But he arrived at this only answer a bit late. No, this only truth. Even though his heart was in conflict, the alarm in his head kept ringing. He wanted to put his own plans, victory, and defeat onto a scale and weigh them. But—

— It was for this reason that he swore an oath on that day.

"That's right, Yakagi Suimei, you are a mage of the Association. As a mage, going against the ideals you decided on is wrong..."

He was talking to himself, as if he wanted to stop his thoughts from freezing up, a ritual to return his goal back into his heart.

And at this moment, something new happened.

“.....”

Closing his mouth shut, Suimei's eyes turned cold and sharp.

There was the presence of someone standing up from behind him. With a corrupt aura like those of a Mazoku, it walked towards him like a ghost. Something that didn't show any signs of life was suddenly filled with vigour and ferociousness.

— So this was why the healing magic didn't work well...

This revealed the mystery of the body behind Suimei. The reason why the Astral body was damaged so unnaturally. It was impossible to exhaust the Astral body through normal physical attacks. Even a lethal attack wouldn't diminish the volume of an Astral body. The power of one's psyche would be weakened if one was injured, but that would just make the psyche more frail, but won't damage the soul.

Hence, the adventurer suffered attacks in addition to the external injuries he had. In the beginning, he didn't know the Astral body was harmed because of an attack that was effective against the soul, or because if it was damage due to corrosion of the soul. It was undoubtedly the latter this time.

This must be a trap for the careless Lefille.

“— All of this.”

“Warrghhhh!!”

Behind Suimei who was thinking about chasing the girl who shed tears of suffering due to her self reproach, the walking dead was approaching.

Part 9

Running. Yes, she was running with all her might. Not stopping even when her legs start to hurt. Just the fact that there was someone waiting for her made Lefille ran alone back the path she came as fast as she could.

Tapping into the extraordinary powers in her body, Lefille relied on the glowing crimson blessing of the goddess and ran. Going through the forest she broke the branches forcefully, and ran as if she was crushing the earth under her feet. Even when images of the worst case scenario flashes in her mind, she didn't give up on the possibility of the people waiting for her was still there.

When she was almost halfway up the hill, the girl stopped and looked back.

"....."

She should only be able to see the cloudy, gloomy sky, and unnatural noises made by the branches, which made the atmosphere even more eerie— But reflected in her eyes were something that appeared on her path here suddenly.

That's right, there were countless bodies paving the path she came. The remains of the Mazoku blocking the way of the girl going to the people waiting for her.

In order to kill Lefille, the Demon General Rajas probably gathered all his lackeys in the vicinity. If she arrived later by a quarter of an hour or so, the forest and hills in a 10 mile radius would be flooded by the Mazoku. It would be impossible to escape then.

Rajas was probably in the area too.

That thing who took everyone precious to Lefille, making people she cherished suffer in death. He even extended his claws to people unrelated to her. That merciless thing was waiting there eagerly.

As if making humans suffer was the only thing he took joy in. That evil being was probably sneering there.

Voices that Lefille shouldn't be able to hear reached her. They were asking her to save them, begging for salvation. It was the voices of the people she couldn't save, even though she hears their pleas.

That's why she couldn't leave it alone, in order to avoid that tragedy again.

Lefille acknowledged the burning fury in her heart, and at this moment.

— Don't go! Lefille!

"Ah..."

Suddenly, the remnants of her memory resounded in her ears. The voices she shouldn't be able to hear again, made her heart burned by wrath waver.

That voice grasped her heart tightly, and the girl couldn't suppress her memories that flowed out. Something important seemed to be glimmering in her heart, a sense of lost she wanted to ignore still lingered.

That's right, the one who stopped Lefille, whose abilities was beyond human. The incredible young man she was just getting familiar with who restrained her from running off. His name is Yakagi Suimei. She met him in Mehter, the capital of Astel. A mage who was a bit weird.

Aside from his black hair which was a rare sight in this region, he didn't have any other features, a young man who looked as if he will disappear into the wind at any moment. If she had to list one thing unique about him, that would be his gentle eyes. Although he wore clothings that wasn't any different from others, he still had an exotic feel about him. No, the aura about him couldn't be described so simply with words. He was a mage unlike any other the girl had seen before.

He claimed to be a traveler making his way to Nelferia, but he was unfamiliar with the common sense of this world for some reason. Recently, she found out he possessed exceptional and shocking knowledge.

Simply put, his personality was warm and kind. As a mage, he should be lofty and reserved, but his actions and words felt naive in all sorts of ways, and his character was far from being cold.

That day, when he parted with the caravan and chased after Lefille, it was easy to deduce that was how his personality was. He would definitely be in danger if he followed her, but Suimei still did that without any regret. He always has her best interest in heart, and even brushed off Lefille's words asking him to stop, and soothe her heart tired from all her setbacks. That was why she could more or less grasp his character.

And that wasn't the only part of his character she grasped.

That night when the curse from the Mazoku activated, he gently embraced Lefille despite her shameful actions.

That's right. Back then I was—

— Yes, she was fearful back then.

She felt the young man who noticed something was wrong and came to her was scary.

No matter how kind and gentle he was, he was still a man. If he saw how she was and that she was doing something shameful, there was no telling what he would do to her.

The instant his arms embraced her, her heart was filled with fear towards the young boy who was worried about her and wanted to help.

In the end, Lefille saw the emotions in his eyes were opposite of the fear she felt, and didn't have a shred of violence.

In his eyes were the light of sympathy and empathy. Normally, he should feel that her shameful appearance was disgusting. But despite that, his hands that touched her back then were so gentle. He didn't lose his head to his base desires that would stem naturally. The hands touching her skin were trembling silently because of his anger towards the curse.

She groaned to his touch, and when she realized it, she heard his apologies for not being of use. It was a weak and depressed voice, lamenting his incompetence in breaking the curse.

He had no obligation to undo the curse in the first place, and didn't need to apologize. But even so, he still apologized as if he was to blame.

And when the time came for their abrupt farewell, what he said was words of restraint for her sake. His actions done for her safety had no chance of being malicious.

"Suimei-kun..."

That's why it's fine now. Because of the way he was, Lefille didn't want him to encounter any more danger. His figure shouldn't be around her, the

one who could only head down the path of destruction.

If he could just hide in the forest obediently, it would be over soon. She might defeat Rajas, or pass on vexingly in Rajas' hands, it would be over soon.

That's right, there was nothing that would please her more than him being safe.

— Even if she couldn't see his cheerful smile ever again.

Even if his voice that tried to stop her echoed in her ears.

Even if the last expression she saw on his face was a mixture of sadness and anxiety.

She knew that her choice was just hopeless wilfulness. All that talk about helping those who abandoned her, was a form of betrayal to the feelings of the one who came to help her alone despite without hesitation. A girl like her had no value in being saved.

But even so, even if things were like this—

"This is fine. This is..."

She found it hard to hold back the tears welling up, it was a warmth that welled up like a tide from the innermost depths of her heart. It was filled with sorrow and anguish, the pain of having no choice but to bear such a fate. If she could meet that young man in another way, she wouldn't have such an ending? When he followed her, when he chatted with her while enduring with the awkwardness, when he tried to stop her from going. She felt so happy during each of these moments.

That's why emotions she never felt before spilled forth when she

reminiscence those times. It wasn't the sadness of a cherished person passing on, or the sorrow of missing a home that was already gone. It was a pain that gripped at her heart, her reluctance to part with him.

But she didn't want to run anymore. She didn't want to see anyone else die. Being helpless while someone besides her was being tormented, she had enough of such things.

"...Ugh."

That's why, she wiped away the warm thoughts falling from the corner of her eyes away, and ran with all her might.

Cleaving through the things that were in her way, Lefille finally reach this place.

If she focused on her senses, she could detect the presence of multiple humans and Mazoku. She could already sense the strange atmosphere of this place from the depth of the forest, and Lefille cut through everything blocking her path and dashed out.

It was an open plain where the vegetation growth seemed unnatural. It was almost dusk, but the air was still heavy as she took in the scene before her eyes — A terrible hell.

"——Tch!?"

The first thing that assaulted Lefille who gave a prayer for having made it in time as she cleave through the trees and dash out, was the mind numbing smell of blood and gore. And the reason behind the bloody smell appeared in her clear eyes. It made her doubt if she had stumbled onto an execution site.

Are these Rajas' minions? Several Mazoku covered in dark demonic aura

was rampaging. Some of the people were busy running for their lives, while others were covered in wounds and lying in a pool of blood, probably dead from the Mazoku's attacks. Amidst the chaos, roars, wails and screeching laughter could be heard.

This scene Lefille witnessed before and didn't want to ever see again filled her with rage.

"Ohhhhh!"

Allowing her emotions to drive her body, Lefille slashed at the Mazoku besides her.

The Mazoku couldn't react in time to Lefille's sudden attack.

The vertical slash that glowed with a crimson glow. Dirt and the death throes of the Mazoku were blown away by her large sword, sending the Mazoku flying in two pieces.

Be it the struggling survivors or the Mazoku that far outnumbered them, all their eyes fell on her. In order to confirm what was happening, everyone watched the interloper who finally arrived after much hardship.

One of them noticed.

"I-It's you!"

It wasn't a question asking who the young girl was, but an exclamation because he found someone familiar.

She wasn't too late, there were still survivors. There were still people surrounded by Mazoku, waiting for rescue. People who resisting death in a hopeless situation.

Yes, she made it. In order to protect those hoping for a miracle.

The girl came to help them, in response to their pleas. That should be the case but—

“Why the hell are you here!?”

What greeted her was the merciless voice of rage.

“Wha...?|

Her movement turned stiff because of the sudden hostility and disgust. Why was she treated with such ill meaning words even though she ran here because everyone was in danger.

“Ms Grakis...”

It was a voice that came from another place. The low tone voice came from a middle aged man, the caravan leader Galeo. He only survived this long because he was a merchant not involved in the fighting. But his voice was trembling with rage. His eyes were filled with hate directed at Lefille. Those eyes seemed to be saying the culprit was right there.

“Mr Galeo...”

“Didn’t I tell you to leave the caravan? The Mazoku attacked because you are here.”

“T-That might be so, but now isn’t the time to talk about that...”

That’s right. Right now, they were on the verge of falling to the Mazoku’s attack. Such meaningless talk should be saved for later, this wasn’t a safe place to talk.

But contrary to Lefille’s thinking, the people around her replied.

“Meaningless talks...? Isn’t this why we got attacked by the Mazoku!?”

“Ugh...”

Lefille didn't have any grounds to address the accusation. It was her fault that the Mazoku was here, so the girl could only endure these cruel words.

As Lefille kept the Mazoku at bay while taking the unreasonable outburst she couldn't deny, the bloody faced man who shouted at the beginning showed a surprised expression.

"Wait... You, why do you know we are being attacked?"

"One of the adventurers escorting the caravan told me about the attack, so..."

"You say he told you... You mean he somehow found you even though he didn't know where you were?"

"Yes."

Lefille nodded, and the escort pressed on:

"How did you come here so fast?"

"I told you now is not the time to talk about this—"

Lefille reminded him, but the escort ignored her.

"Answer me."

"Ughh..."

Escort didn't leave any room for negotiation and the air was tense. It made the ghastly aura about his bloody body even more eerie. But why was this happening? They should know the urgency of the matter, why were they bothering with such trivial details?

Oh no...

This is bad, we have to strengthen our defences, Lefille thought. Her concentration was disrupted because of the conversation. But when she shut her mouth and surveyed the surroundings, she saw that the Mazokus were sneering.

They were like bystanders watching an ugly internal discord.

Wha...?

Why didn't the Mazoku showed any signs of attacking?

Why didn't they attack everyone? The insidious laughter sent a chill through Lefille's body. If they want to kill the caravan off, now would be the best chance to do that, so why did they stop their bloodied claws? A strange atmosphere hanged in the air. This was a matter of life and death, so why did they ignore this point, and insist on acting out such a poorly scripted drama?

"Hey, are you listening!?"

Just when Lefille was baffled by this situation, the escort suddenly shouted at her.

"— Tch!! That doesn't matter!! Regroup now and escape!!"

"Escape? Where can we run to!? There's Mazoku everywhere here! Anything we do will be futile!"

"That might be so... But if we talk so defenselessly..."

"Don't try to hide it."

"—I'm not hiding anything!"

"... You don't want to tell us. Am I right?"

"What—!?"

"You don't dare to tell us the truth!! You have been loitering around us all this while! That's why you can make it here so fast! Isn't it!?"

That's that true. She used the power of the spirits in the forest and rushed here from far away. She wasn't in the vicinity. But how should she explain. There wasn't any use in saying them—

"That's why we were attacked right!? Because you didn't leave and is just in the area, so we were attacked!"

"No! That's not true!"

"Not true!? If not, how did you get here so fast!?"

"Ughh..."

So that's why he was so furious. An indescribable resentment assaulted her. Following that, she was showered by grudgeful gazes.

Do they really want to push the blame onto me so much? Humans who were on the verge of death will vent their negative emotions at others arbitrary. That's how much of a failure the creature known as man was.

"Ms Grakis, because of you..."

"I..."

As if she was being punched repeatedly, the impact of the accusations made the girl shake her head.

These baseless rumours pushing all the responsibility onto her gave Lefille the illusion that the world was spinning around her. Hostility and censure robbed her of her balance.

Why are they blaming me. Why must they curse and swear in a place like this. I came for the sake of everyone. Even though I am risking my life in

this godforsaken place to save everyone.

Even though she did this for everyone, and even rejected the gentle hands of that young man—

“Why... I am here to save everyone...”

“Shut up! It’s all your fault! We only encounter such a thing because of you!!”

“I-I am...”

The accusations and swearings were like a curse. Isn’t there any exception, does everyone think it’s my fault? Lefille only came here in the hope that everyone was safe, but she still had to endure their loathe and curses.

The swearing from everyone tumbled in the girl’s head, when a painful roar erupted.

Shifting her gaze to the origin of the sound, Lefille saw an arm as thick as a log protruding out of a chest of one of the escort. That was definitely an arm of a Mazoku.

The escort was killed by this piercing blow and fell limp forward. Appearing behind him was—

“You are finally here, Swordswoman of Noshias.”

“—、Rajas!! You bastard!!”

“You are overbearing as usual. What, you are that eager to take my head?”

Her killing intent was directed at Rajas who was mocking her. There wasn’t anything else to say, wasn’t this obvious? Because this bastard

who was an incarnation of destruction and violence took everything important from her. Without a doubt, her hostility and murderous urge was pointed at him. Yes, because of this rage—

“It’s all your fault, you... you did all of this!”

Because of the tragedy happening before her once again, she couldn’t suppress her emotions anymore. These words spilled forth because of her intense emotions. But it wasn’t clear how Rajas interpret her feelings, as he looked around him and laughed deviously as if he was waiting for these very words.

“What are you saying, this is your fault, woman of Noshias. These bunch of people only meet with misfortune because you are here, right?”

Rajas smiled sinisterly, as if he was anticipating something. It was true that Lefille was part of the reason, but Rajas who created this mess was definitely not qualified to say this.

But Rajas was sneering. Looking at the group behind Lefille as if he was watching fools.

Ah—

When Lefille realized why Rajas said that, it was already too late.

The gaze of the group stung her back. When she noticed it and turned back, all of them were glaring at her wrathfully.

“So it is because of you...”

“I-If you are not here...”

“It’s all your fault...”

Those weren’t sounds of humans anymore. What came out of their mouth

seemed to be the congregation of hate filled with malice.

The words of denial came out of her mouth unconsciously.

“N-No! Listen to me, it’s not like this!”

“Shut up! You bitch! You are the source of all evil!”

The survivors started swearing at her. When she realized it, even the calm Mr Galeo was also cursing at her. Hatred poured down at her from all sides.

Why didn’t they trust her who came forth to help them, but side with the devil? They should realize something was off if they think about it a little. Why were they blinded by the words and sights in front of them, and fail to see the true nature of things—

“... No, it’s not my fault! I didn’t want anyone to get hurt...”

Shut up. It’s all your fault. It’s because of you. Because you are here. The Mazoku said so too. Murderer. Death god.

The voices that entered her ears kept blaming her and made it her fault.

“I-I’m not wrong!! Why, why can’t everyone understand!?”

Lefille screamed with all her might. Maybe this was the emotions she had been suppressing in her heart. Rajas who saw this scene laughed heartily.

“Fuhahah! You humans are so dumb! When something happens, you only know how to curse, swear and demean others! After peeling away the exterior, you are beings that are uglier than maggots!”

After enjoying this happiness, Rajas turned to the Mazoku around him—

“— Do it”

He ordered the massacre.

“—Tch!!”

His words made her heart that was wounded by the accusations strengthen. Even though her face was wet with her vexed and painful tears, she endured it and gritted her teeth.

Lefille won't let him do as he pleased. As she was thinking that—

“Huh—?”

Even though her heart took a step forward, Lefille's body did not respond. Her power that allowed her to run and leap was not conveyed to her legs, her usual swiftness was gone. Her feet weren't moving as well as she imagined.

Her movement dulled. There wasn't any doubt that she had slowed down.

As for the reason, it's because of the gaze of the crowd that made her unable to move. Yes, it wasn't from Rajas or the Mazoku around her, but because of her fellow humans. Their accusations bounded her.

And her dulled movement had fatal consequences.

“Ughhh!”

“Ah, ah ah! Ahhhh!”

“I don't want to die! I don't want to die! Ah, ah, ah—!”

“Don't come! Don't come here! Don't ahhhhhh— Ughh!?”

The people around her were slaughtered by the Mazoku helplessly. Be it the escort that blamed her, the adventurers that swore at her, Galeo who glared at her with hatred or the other merchants.

When the Mazoku attacked the last person, her body finally recovers.

It was too late. Even though her head knows that, her heart refused to stop.

Cleaving through the back of the Mazoku who was blocking her view of the last person, she looked down. On the ground was a person dyed red with the blood of the Mazoku and her own blood.

It was a girl. When she took the request at the guild, she was a mage in the monster subjugation team. The one closest to her in the group, someone she think of as a friend—

Lefille knelt down and held the girl.

“Be strong!”

“Ah, ugh...”

The girl groaned in pain. And reached a trembling hand turned red by her blood to Lefille. She uttered these words between her soft gasping breathes.

“... If... you...”

“Huh...?”

“If only...you weren’t here...”

“——”

In the end, she died after muttering words akin to a curse. She left behind a bloody mark around Lefille’s neck with both of her hands, and a corpse that had nothing to do with the term ‘RIP in peace’. Reflected in Lefille’s eyes was a face twisted with hatred. As if Lefille was her mortal enemy, and in the last moment of her life, she vented her grudge and

curses at Lefille.

... Lefille's arms and shoulders that were holding her fell weakly.

At the same time, a cracking voice shattered everything she believed in.

Chapter 04

That shining back is burning bright above all



— Father was a quiet man.

I could vividly remember him every time I closed my eyes. He did not get easily excited and was like a man devoid of emotions, simply sitting on his wheelchair like a statue: Yakagi Kazamitsu.

He simply sat on the rocking chair by veranda and looked out at the endless sky beyond the window.

He was the best magician of the eastern world. He was the very epitome of “silent” and rarely spoke. He stood by the saying that words have consequences — but the relationship between me and my father, even if you excluded the fact we were a magician family, were far from normal. We had small, everyday conversations but never anything deep. Only thing that was close to a deep conversation was when he was teaching me magic.

After teaching the mysteries of magic. After teaching the attitude of a magician. And then, only then, did he speak as if he remembered all the passion he had forgotten somewhere in life about the philosophy of the Association: To establish the research topic that the leader of the Association spoke of.

There lied what he sought after. He spoke of it it like a habit: to seek out the mystery and realize one’s potential.

If anyone else heard it, they would think it’s some child’s wild dreams.

I thought so too when I was young. When my father enthusiastically spoke of the philosophy of the Association, I asked why he clung onto something like that. He remembered the days he could never return to and spoke of it only once.

— He had a woman he wanted to protect.

She was a woman who was cursed with the curse of destruction. A woman who went hand in hand with cold rain and sadness filled with pain. A woman who couldn’t blossom in both light and the dark. She was a pitiable woman who was shunned by others for her fate to meet an unhappy end and lived in a hellish state of no one even glancing at her

way.

She was always beside father and always cried in his arms. Father said even he had seen her truly smile only once. He said even the smile on her last moment was her trying to console him. He had promised to protect her until the end, but couldn't keep that promise.

— I couldn't protect your mother.

That's what my father said before he passed away. In the last moments of subjugating a dragon which revived. While pressing down on the wound he received from protecting me as he was about to deliver the final blow to the dragon. Why was he telling this story just now? There were plenty of opportunities before. Why did he keep that story all wrapped up to himself. Keeping it secret even to his only child.

When I asked that, he replied.

He didn't want to burden me with it.

I was a child born between an unlucky woman and a foolish man. From the moment I was born, a relationship with a cursed person was forced on me. If he talked about it, I would chase after the Research Topic like he did, and would walk down the path of hopelessness just as he did.

That was why he didn't talk about it.

Then why was he saying it now? Did he have a change of heart and wanted to come clean with everything? Why did he swear never to reveal the secret, yet told me all about it just then?

It was a question that didn't need an answer. It was because he suddenly became talkative while on the death's doorstep. More than he had ever spoken. Even more so than when he taught me magic.

Was his sigh born out of self-deprecation of the hopeless path he had trodden thus far? Or did he simply feel pitiful at his talkative self?

After his sigh, he said something that didn't suit him.

— That he still had regrets. It didn't matter if his body rotted and disappeared from the face of the earth, but the memories of the dreams he shared with her, the emotions they shared, he didn't want it to all disappear along with his body.

His feelings never reached their fruition, and it was a path filled with pain and worries. Even then — he wanted at least me to remember them. That there was a man like him and a woman like her. That they had dreams together. That there were days they walked together in pursuit of their happy future.

It was out of nowhere. Also, what was I supposed to do when he confessed his feelings like that in here of all places? There was only one answer I could give him.

Yea, there was no choice. I was a magician just like my father was.

But — what he said lingered around me.

“— Suimei, if there was anything I've chosen in my life, it was magic and Shizuma. Now, I have only you to rely on. So I implore you. Find the Association's philosophy. If the truth the leader seek really exist, then there is no one who can't be saved in this world. So —”

— Save the women who cannot be saved in my place.

After leaving behind the word “Sorry”, the man who dreamt of a happy future with his family passed away. Without even listening to my replies.

As if he already spoke everything he wanted to say. Like a real statue this time. The dreams he had imagined in the sky just beyond the window. Without ever being able to see the happy family he had hoped for.

He was willful. He forced me on an abnormal path, a dangerous path. And to preach such a happy dream to me.

It all felt abrupt.

So that's why. That was why I shouted at the dragon that was letting out its last roar.

— I will achieve your dreams. At any cost.

... Yes, there was a day like that. The day I howled at the grief of losing my father. The oath I shouted back then. I never once felt my actions were wrong since then. Thus, after chasing the mystery, here I was.

To walk towards the end of the path and prove that there was nobody who cannot be saved.

It was a childish dream. It wasn't realistic and there was no feasible chance of reaching the end of the path. It was more faint than looking for a slightest outline of a figure in thick morning fog. But I wanted to achieve that dream. It was a dream that I wanted to achieve.

Science and magic. Regardless of the discipline, the wisdom that is said to lie at the end after solving the laws of nature: the Akashic Records.

Past, present, future and the astral plane as well. The record which contains everything. If a happy future for those who could not be saved was written down, then they could be saved. The leader's philosophy to pursue happiness for all. If someone could find the record, it would validate that the path those two had trodden on was not pointless.

The oath like confession now was a vow.

".... Father, the words you left behind might have been a curse binding my future. But I am your son and a magician. I want to see what you chased after. So —"

Just like you, I will go to save those who could not be saved. I will save them no matter what. In this world as well as that world.

I closed my eyes and slowly chewed on my oath. Never forget. I steeled my resolve once again. I will save her. I will save that girl crying from the misfortune she has to carry with her.

When I opened my eyes, a disgusting desert filled my sight. Just glancing at those creatures filled with evil and malice was enough to make me feel disgusted. They were swarming like maggots on a piece of rotten carcass.

It was a funny situation. I made all that ruckus back in the castle because I didn't want to run into something like this. Now here they were. What a cruel irony.

"Hmph."

I blew away any sense of self-deprecation with that snort. I remembered what Rajas said to Lefille and glanced left and right furiously. They were probably that thing's subordinates. How many of them were there?

Thousand? Ten Thousand? It was no use thinking about it now, but I didn't like how many of them there were.

Suimei took a step forward towards the sea of monstrosities.

They probably noticed his movement as the mazokus rushed to attack. Creatures that were touched by the breath from the god of death which preys on this world from outer realm. They were minions befitting it.

Possessing neither mana, nor qi, nor astral body, they were abnormal and irregular creatures that possessed black aura-like power.

“Ha...”

It was annoying. What was a mazoku? They were creatures principally opposite to human in fantasy setting like a game or a novel. Why do I, a modern magician, need to fight something that comes out in a fairy tale? It was annoying. The philosophy of the Association. The dream father chased after. Why am I fighting a Demon King hell bent on destroying the world instead of chasing after my small dream—.

That’s right. My other deep inside self came to a realization and looked at me with its cold eyes. Ahh... I was sick of it. Sick of it all.

Mazokus bared their claws and charged at Suimei even as he closed my eyes and sighed. They simply rushed forward like a charging boar, as if they knew nothing about fighting.

“Ex hoc loco evanescent.” (Return to dust.)

With a chant, a lightning bolt streak past the body of the Mazoku. All that’s left was a blue magic circle and a magical symbol. The mazoku flew back along with its now amputated arm, and Suimei didn’t even look at these shattered pieces.

Suimei could feel a cold psychic aura from inside the wall of bodies and focused in that direction, and increased his powers. Were they trying to cast some sort of magic? The spell bore some resemblance to the evil cult that worship the evil god of Solomon’s 72 pillar, as they transformed their black aura into fireballs.

The flame flew relentlessly. Needless to say, it was headed for Suimei.

But it was slow. Compared to a HEAT round fired from a tank, it was slow in comparison. Even at a glance, by the time the flame took shape and flew over, Suimei could have cast three spells.

He didn't even bother looking at the fireball and sidestepped. The fireball simply passed on by.

Its firepower wasn't great either. If Suimei really wanted to defend, he could have casted a spell that could block a stream of metal jet travelling at mach 20 that would pierce any armour. So there was no need to worry about some mediocre explosion behind me. He only needed to look forward.

Even if there was a mazoku attacking from air, there was no reason to let it pass by him.

"Et cadens in terram." (He shall fall to the ground)

A single phrase. His right feet, which was imbued to the limit with mana, stepped on mazokus that were stuck flat on the ground without any heed. They were weak. Suimei thought there was something wrong with himself to consider them a threat. If you knew how to fight, this was how things were. They were even less of a tripping hazard than a small pebble.

Suimei was a fool. He was a fool, but he couldn't stop. He couldn't stop because he promised.

"I —"

— I decided to break out. Through this road.

— That's what I decided. I will follow this path.

Even if I fall or tumble, I will never give up this route. I resolved myself

there.

To prove that it's possible to save someone if you wanted to save them.
To reach the Akashic Records and realizing father's dream. My father's and my dream.

It was foolish to simply cut through the middle of mazoku army. But this path definitely lead there.

“—Archiatius overload.” (Mana furnace overdrive)

With the spell, what appeared at the tip of his feet was rainbow coloured magic circle. What was its diameter? A magic circle roughly five meters in diameter containing complex pattern of numbers and letters awakened as if it had been waiting.

And the mana that was released. The mana source rotated with exploding sound at furious pace when the core overloaded. There was enough mana to cause lightings and they sent out shockwaves all over the place. Furious tornado struck, ground exploded and the mazoku's fence flew high into the air.

The ground shook and groaned. The scenery of everything in the vicinity being shattered and turning into dust was a masterpiece. Once the mana overdrive stopped, the abnormal creatures gathered like a cloud and charged once again like an avalanche.

Suimei shook off the dust on his coat from the mana whirlwind. The mazokus in front of him still filled the plain. Funnily enough, he remembered was what his father said.

“A hopeless path huh.... Fufu— Just the way I like it!”

In front of the swarm of those abominable creatures, Suimei spat out

those words.

He didn't care about the Demon King. He didn't care about going back to my world for now. Suimei just didn't want to give up protecting that girl.

"Hyaaaaat!"

Was that sharp voice the shout to resolve her fighting spirit or the despair of a girl fighting against futility?

Lefille carried her outburst of emotion onto her honed sword and delivered a flare like attack to Demon General Rajas.

The strike created glowing crimson mana wind. Mana wind would normally cut through the earth, the mountain, the sky, without discriminating the size of the target. However, Rajas simply blocked the attack with his dark aura surrounded arm.

The power of the spirit which had exterminated countless mazokus and monsters thus far couldn't even scratch his skin and the aura was enough to deflect the attack. It was as if Rajas himself was saying that kind of power was laughable.

"Kuuuh...ugh!"

"Hahaha!! What's the matter, swordsman of Noshias? Is that the best you can do?"

"Shut uuuupppp!!!"

She replied his ridicules with a scream. What she struck next with was another crimson strike, the 'May Rain'. Rajas countered the wild yet regulated strike directly with his ominous aura-filled fist.

Red lines collided with dark lines and retracted. It was a clash of strength. The ground both party stood on could not withstand the power and cracked with each exchange between the sword and the fist.

Lefille was losing. If Lefille and Rajas' strength could be put on scale, it would lean towards Rajas. If she retreated a single step, he would advance two steps and if she swung ten times, he would counter eleven times.

Whatever she did, she couldn't win against Rajas. The number of wounds on her body only grew.

"Hyyaaap!!"

Amidst flurry of attacks, Rajas prepared to launch a massive strike to finish the fight. She noticed it — but her body didn't listen. Normally, she could deliver five strikes while the opponent was preparing for such a cumbersome attack, but because of the injuries to her hand, even a single strike was difficult. She barely withstood Rajas' fist using the giant sword as a shield.

She groaned at the shockwave that bore through her body and retreated.

"Kuuh....."

When she knelt on the ground and breathed harshly, Rajas spoke with a mocking laughter.

"Kukuku. This is just like the repeat from that time"

".... repeat?"

"Yes. Repeat from when we attacked your home. Just like that time..."

She could remember her home when he spoke of it. Just as Rajas said,

the day when mazokus invaded Noshias. She could never forget that sight. While battling the endless tide of mazokus, what appeared amongst a sea of minions was Rajas. With immense strength standing above any mazoku, it destroyed everything in its path.

In the face of overwhelming strength, she knelt just like now.

Blaming herself for not being strong enough while watching her comrades get mercilessly slaughtered before her eyes. After that, she fought him multiple times at different places and time until the capital fell, but the results were only repeated.

At the end of every battle was her kneeling and someone sacrificing themselves to save her. Comrades and friends. It was always someone precious to her.

They sacrificed themselves protecting her, someone who lost to mazokus.

“Uuh, uggh....”

When she was moaning from the resurfacing memories, Rajas raised a corner of his mouth.

“Isn’t that right? You cannot win against me with your strength.”

She couldn’t win. It stuck to her heart. It was already proved. It was the fact. Merciless words that denied everything she stood for. It was like a sound of distant thunder. It was loud and noisy like a coming thunder cloud. Rajas’ voice was the same. Loud miscellaneous noise buzzed in her heart.

“Shut, up....”

“Do you feel scorned? Seems like I’ve nailed it on the spot. — But you, you ran everytime. Even though you claimed that you would protect your

people and comrades so loudly, you showed your back to us many times. You always refused to fight to the end."

"Shut up.... SHUT UP.....! Shut your damned mouth!"

"Shut my mouth? So you want to hear nothing of your cowardice? Seems like you're not proud of it. Kuku — I suppose everyone wants to hide their shame. You don't want others to see it. You don't want others to criticize you for it. Especially so since you know what a shame it is. But didn't you abandon those who went to their death? Didn't you run because you wanted to save your own precious life? Is anything I said wrong?"

She wanted to smash that smug smile and attitude as if he saw through everything. He knew nothing. Nothing about her, who had to crush her heart many times due to her fate. Nothing about those who sacrificed themselves to protect her. Nothing about the emotions involved. Knowing nothing.

"Do you know what happened to every human after you escaped Noshias?"

"W, what are you talking about...?"

"Your comrades, your friends and your family. I'm talking about those who risked their lives to smuggle you out. In the end, they suffered."

"What did you do to them....."

"What did I do? I ripped off their limbs and played with them slowly until they died! I remember it being fun. They tried to sacrifice their lives for something they believed in, but they all screamed in pain, fear and eventually cursed your precious goddess. Well, they didn't show much reaction at the beginning, so it was somewhat boring. Ku-hahahahah!!!!"

“—!”

His laughter shredded her heart. Scenes played out in her mind that appeared and disappeared as Rajas spoke. It was the sight of those who met an agonizing end. How painful would it have been? How much would they have put up with? How much did they despair? The empty eyes of those who had died for her gazed at her. Voices of the phantoms that doesn't exist seeped into her heart.

“Nonsense... father... everyone...”

“Do you see now? Do you see what happened in your home and the pitiful end of your beloved ones? Hahahahah!”

“How dare you... how dare...!!”

“Are you angry? Are you unable to contain your anger? Swordman of Noshias, this is your punishment. It is a fitting punishment for running away every time.”

“UAAAAAAAAARRRGHH!!”

She rushed at Rajas who was saying that she was the cause of it all. It was a strike with all her spirit. It was an attack without a form nor balance. It was almost a foolish frontal strike that lost all shape due to rage and chaotic emotions.

“How boring.”

But it was deflected. Rajas' fist deflected the sword and more mocking words flew her way. Everything was insufficient. Her sword. Her emotions. Her shouts. Everything.

“Kuugh!”

But it wasn't over yet. It was when she clenched her teeth to deliver another strike.

“—”

With a sneering voice, aura that had been circulating in Rajas' hand quickly expanded.

— It was

“Uuu....uuu...”

Despair that seem to sap the strength from her entire body revived.

The scene she had watched multiple times from Rajas' hand passed in her mind like a phantasmagoria. Her spirit, which had been driven by rage up until this point collapsed. This was that magic. The reason why Rajas was called the “Demon Chief”. It was Rajas' ultimate magic that disintegrated a fortress without a trace in a middle of battle from that time.

A crimson coagulated mass expanded to form a bead big enough to swallow a grown man — and maintained its form. It stopped momentarily like a calm ocean before a storm, and started to shake as if it was the signal for its release.

There was no way to dodge it. It was powerful enough to destroy an entire fortress. It was not an attack one could dodge due to its wide area of effect. Only thing she could do was draw as much power from the spirit to protect herself.

— and a dark tidal wave swallowed her whole.

“Uuu aaaaahhhh!!”

Ominous dark energy surrounded her. It felt everything was being

destroyed. It felt everything was being taken away. Amidst darkness that seem to prophesize the end, all five senses went away.

.... And after what felt like an eternity, everything around her was gone. Trees, rocks, the adventurer's corpses, that girl's corpse, everything.

"Ah, ugh...huk...!"

She could withstand the attack. But what's left was only her battered body after having spent all her strength. It was the same as before. A repeat. Only her, who possessed strong spirit power, survived. Carrying only the burden of guilt and pain of a survivor.

Her entire body was pulled as if it was pinned to midair. Then.

"Let me go — Kuuh!"

A fist found its mark on her stomach. A heavy strike from an arm as thick as a log broke through the weakened spirit defense and impacted her intestines.

"Not yet."

Rajas, filled with gratification, raised a corner of his mouth and a flurry of fists commenced at the same time. Countless strikes. Countless strikes without an end. The boulder like fists all found their mark. The pain-filled moans flowed out from her mouth every time the fist struck. Only sound she could make was pain-filled moans that pleaded to stop.

In the end, she threw up everything in her stomach. Then her body was discarded onto the ground like a piece of tissue.

"Ha ugh, ha... ugh..."

She lay flat on the ground writhing and drooling as she opened her

mouth to breathe. It was as if she became a caterpillar, no, something even lesser.

Everything was painful. It was painful. Her heart hurt even more than her body. Physically and mentally. After withstanding countless attacks from Rajas that slowly gnawed at her heart, she couldn't move her body. She couldn't put her strength into anything. She couldn't think anything. She wanted to give up on everything.

But Rajas didn't stop his attacks.

"How fitting."

"Ugh, uhhhh....."

"Did you try to protect others with only that kind of strength?"

A question flew at her while she was trying to stand up, using the sword as a support. It was meant to make her think about it, but there was no need to think about it. There was no meaning in thinking about it either. Because—

"So, were you able to protect them?"

She already knew it.

"If you could go back in time, do you think you can change the outcome?"

She already knew. So—

"That's right. You can't protect anything. Not a single person."

— please, stop....

"Huuu... huk..."

Everything was as Rajas said. Not just her comrades from back home, but she couldn't protect the merchants as well. Even if she went back in time, it would have been a repeat. That despair, those tears, she couldn't stop them.

She could never win against this mazoku. That was right. Never.

It was painful. The cold reality was more cruel than the physical pain. Bitterness of having to hear that she couldn't do anything. That was the main point.

"Acknowledge it, no, you've already started to acknowledge it, didn't you? About what a pathetic existence you are."

"I.... I am...."

"It was your fault. All of it. No exceptions. They all died because of you."

"Ah—"

"Isn't that right?"

"AH! AAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!"

She dropped the sword that was supporting her and all strength went out from underneath her. Arms hung carelessly and shoulders drooped without any strength.

There was no strength left to hold on to the sword.

"....."

"— finally broken?"

A joyous voice that carried a conclusion pierced her body.

That was right. She was broken. There was no more will to fight against

Rajas. Everything that was precious to her, all her pride, her body which had everything taken away from; She didn't care what happened to it.

"Hmph. Now you don't even have any worth for me to kill you personally. Just like your loved ones before you, it's fitting that you die after being played around."

She could see Rajas signal his subordinates after speaking. Several mazokus that were being protected by his dark aura immediately responded to his signal.

At the end of her fading sight, she could see mazokus drawing closer. Racing to be the first one to kill her. What came clearly in her sight were the claws that would rob her life, unkempt appearances, disgusting smiles and malice-filled murky eyes. Everything turned into a slow motion as they drew closer.

"Ah...."

That was what flowed out of her voice.

..... Why was it? Why was her end like this? Was it not enough that everything precious to her was taken away, that she was humiliated and had lost? Did her heart had to be crushed as well? She wanted to live upright so far and lived upright until now.

But it was a mistake. Why was it a mistake? Why did it lead to such a tragic end.

Hope didn't exist. Then who made the word "hope"? What was the word made for? It didn't exist anywhere in the world.

That was right. It was useless to chase after a hope. It was useless to cling to it as well. Hope was nothing but a cruel trick to sink humans

deeper into a pit of despair. How foolish was she for having believed such a thing existed until now?

What sprouted along with tears was a curse against the world that forced miseries on her. And—

“Someone. Help....”

What came out of her mouth was a desire truly like her. How could she wish for a salvation even after everything turned out like this. There was no way such a miracle existed in this world. Not a single chance, but—

Just as she was about to close her eyes against encroaching darkness, thundering noise passed by her.

Glowing blue lightning blinded her and everything became white.

Mazokus that were attacking, sky filled with darkness, everything disappeared. The ruinous earth, Rajas, everything disappeared into the white light.

When the noise and the blinding light died down, all the mazokus that were rushing towards her had disappeared.

She looked around her. Without her noticing, someone gently wiped the warm tears that obscured her vision.

And there stood—

“Who are you?”

Something black fluttered. The one who stood before her was someone she knew—that boy who wore black and gave off a silent aura never seen before was—

— It was natural to close the eyes before a burning white light and let the after-images pass away. Suimei predicted when the light would disappear and slowly opened his eyes.

The atrocity that laid before his eyes made him fume quietly.

Aah, evil exist in this place as well. Evil that ridicules those who try to live honestly as foolish. Evil that steps on those soaked with tears and mourn. Evil that traps others in sadness and despair yet feel no guilt about it.

Evil that snatches away the pride of someone who strives for justice.

Evil that knows nothing of the nobility of those who fight to protect others.

That unforgivable evil.

That's right. That evil incarnate which robs others of even tiniest shred of hope for happiness.

Admist the gradually flash of light, Suimei walk with a leisurely pace to Lefille and stood in front of her.

After the light disappeared, what soaked her eyes were tears. The torrent of tears were endless. Suimei wiped away those tears with his finger. He didn't want her to cry anymore. He wanted the tears to disappear immediately.

Her eyes were swollen red from crying. Her battered body. The reason why it was pitiful just to look at her was because she had gone through unimaginable pain.

Suimei whispered "I'm sorry for being late".

"Ah—"

It was a soft voice that flowed out from her heart before it could fully become an emotion. It was like the last sigh before the light in her heart

burned out.

She was a girl who spent countless days being sad, filled with pain, blaming herself and in the end, couldn't forgive herself. Why did that girl, that kind girl have to suffer something like this? Why did the girl who was never greedy and pursued justice in the world have to suffer this kind of an end? Why did the world need to push only the people like her into the edge of misery?

"Aaah—"

— Those who make others cry, remember. That there is no rain of sadness that cannot be overcome.

— Those who cause others pain, remember. That there is no ember of pain that cannot be destroyed.

— Those who are drunk in evil, do not forget. That there is no place on this world for evil creatures such as yourselves to tread on.

"— Who are you?"

"A magician. Yakagi Suimei."

I'll prove it with my body that I am a modern magician right here and right now.

.



A gust of wind passed by: did the voice of the boy standing quietly beside her summon it, or was his voice the gust itself? A single phrase that passed by with a cold breeze in heated air. Rajas must have heard it as well.

"A... magician."

Rajas frowned and repeated Suimei's words. He didn't recognize Suimei for a moment due to his different clothes, but soon made an expression of recognition.

"Yes, you're that... annoying mage kid from that time."

Suimei remained silent, leaned sideways and stared down at Rajas. Rajas spoke in bemused tone as if he was pleasantly surprised.

"So, a mere mage managed to get here past all my subordinates. There

should have been quite a lot of them, hmmm?"

"Yea, needlessly many. You seem to have scrapped all kinds of trash together. I almost threw up."

"Seems like you had quite the fun with those trash. Considering your state, I can feel the genuineness of your words. Kuhahahaha!!"

Rajas smiled mockingly while twisting his words. But Suimei's appearance was indeed pitiful. There were no visible wounds, but his black clothes were torn everywhere. Neither his stance nor movement felt spritely, his rough breathing felt somewhat laboured and there were even faint sword marks on his face. It showed that getting here must have been quite a chore.

Rajas looked at Suimei and asked as if he was still interested.

"— So? How did you get here? Did you go through them all or did you try to run?"

"I simply removed the ones blocking my path."

"Hoo.. Talking big when you look like that."

Rajas laughed mockingly again. Perhaps he saw Suimei and thought of it only as a bluff of a wounded person. The way Suimei talked confidently only appeared as a bluff from someone who did not like losing.

"So tell me. Why did you go through all that to come here?"

"I don't think now's the time to be nitpicky about a small detail like that."

"... You're not going to say you came to rescue that girl over there, are you?"

"What if that's the truth?"

Suimei replied to Rajas' question. He came to rescue her. To be her strength. Even though she refused his hand for help. Even though she didn't need to do that. It was too late now.

Rajas noticed Suimei's will and exploded into laughter a beat later.

"What?! HAHAAHAA!! You really said something like that!! You came to save a girl in this situation?! You must be out of your mind!"

That was right. Just like Rajas said, he was out of his mind. He couldn't have been thinking rationally to go through an army of mazes to walk through the jaws of death. There was nothing he could gain by coming here. There was nothing a human could want. He would only have things to lose by coming here. But why?

"Do you think this wench is worth saving? This tramp who couldn't save anything and ran from every battle to save her own precious life?"

"Yea."

What was he thinking, nodding with his eyes closed? He admitted that it was a foolish action and knew it in his heart. To him Rajas —

"Fufu— what make you go so far for her? Isn't it fine for you to avoid getting injured and simply ignore this wench? Isn't it fine for you to forget about her as if she never existed in the first place?"

"I can't do that. If I did that, I couldn't save her."

"What—?"

When Rajas frowned at the unexpected answer from Suimei, Suimei spoke challengingly.

"And saving the unfortunate. Saving those who cannot be saved is the path I believe in. I simply couldn't abandon that path. So that's why—"

That's why I came all the way here to a place like this.

That was right. Suimei triumphantly declared himself. He declared that he was there to save her and to fight him.

Rajas looked stunned to hear the resolve of Suimei's declaration for a moment, but soon let out a sigh.

"Ha—"

Rajas mocked Suimei's declaration.

"Uhahahah!!! How foolish! For that kind of reason! You came here for that?! You walk into the jaw of death going through my subordinates! And this is what you say? Saving those who cannot be saved? To think you came all the way here with that kind of useless ideal. There's a limit to how stupid you can be!! Uhahahahah! It's hilarious —"

"So what?"

"—?!"

What stopped Rajas' rambunctious laughter was Suimei's cold reply.

A gust of wind: colder than the chilly wind sweeping the northern lands froze everyone's heart and took away even the sound of laughter, and sound of fear, as if they were not necessary.

What filled the area was chilling cold. It was not that the temperature was cold. There was a source of coldness that was enough to flay skins and rob consciousness. Areas that had just been heated up by Rajas' spirit appeared as if they had turned into a sheet of ice. And the boy who created this situation, Suimei, looked at the Demon General who laughed at his resolve unwaveringly in the eyes.

".... Boy, you better change the way you're looking at me. I don't like it."

"You think I'm going to listen to you?"

"Then I'll make you listen by force!"

What came out of Rajas' mouth was a roar loud enough to shake everything around them. The shockwave stirred up dust into the air and pebbles to shoot off in every direction. In a moment, an arm and a fist resembling an ancient oak tree trunk flew towards Suimei.

What resisted the arm that would turn everything in its path into a pulp of meat was a unique spell that Rajas never heard before.

"Primium ex puinoim excipio." (Five-layered wall)

Five magical circles glowing golden formed from the tip of Suimei's extended arm to form a shield. Whether it was drawn or formed, the shattered fragments came together to form their original shape.

The golden defense was perfectly on time. Rajas' fist and Suimei's magic collided.

Golden spark flew everywhere and whether it reached its limit or its purpose was different in the first place, the second magic circle flew back and so did the third circle.

"Oooooohhhhhhhhhh!!"

"Hyaaaaaaaaahhh!!"

The fist tried to penetrate the magical circle and the magic that remained firm in place with golden sparks flying out from every punch. The ground cracked as it failed against the shockwave and windstorm swept the area. They soon formed a wind stream and dyed the air with the dread of the battle.

Amidst the exchange of shouts between both parties, the fourth magic circle started rotating. And then—

“Hiiik—?!”

The massive force that was directed at Suimei suddenly changed direction. With a thunderous sound, Rajas’ immense body sheared the earth as it was thrown back over a hill by a tsunami of wind.

“Che. Even with the 5th Wall (attenuation wall) he only flew back that much.... Man, he’s unnecessarily strong...”

Suimei shrugged his shoulders while cursing Rajas, who had disappeared beyond his sight. But he was weakened as well. Considering how many he had to fight while coming to rescue Lefille, it was only natural.

Out of nowhere, he turned to face her, and—

“Stand up, Lefille. Let’s take him down.”

He said that towards me. Let’s fight together. The two of us can fight together. As if he wanted my co-operation— no, to encourage me, who had given up. They were sincerely genuine. The eyes that looked at me glowed mysterious crimson and shined honesty above all. Passion that shined through those eyes were like glowing red hot steel. They were passionate eyes. Eyes of a man who will never compromise his belief.

But I didn’t have enough strength left to stand alongside his resolve.

It was all used up in the battle with Rajas just before. So I couldn’t—

“I can’t.”

That was right. I could only drop my head and give up.

“Hmmm—?”

“I can’t. I can’t win against him. You can’t win against him and neither can I. He’s going to kill us both.”

"Oi.... Lefille, what happened to you?"

Suimei asked as if he was taken aback. He probably believed that we could combine our strength to fight. That two of us could defeat him. But now, everything was hopeless. Because....

"We can't win against Rajas. That mazoku is too strong. Even if we combine our strength, we can't win."

"How can you know without trying?"

"No, I can tell. Rajas is strong. Even the elites of Noshias' army fell before him. We can't defeat something like him with just our strength. It's impossible. It's both yours and my fate to die by Rajas' hands."

That was the way it was meant to be. It was an unchangeable fate. My prediction of the future probably sounded like me being weak to him. But it was the truth. No matter how strong one's heart was, no matter how courageous one was, it was nothing but a midsummer night's dream in front of those with absolute power.

Looking at the sight of me, Suimei dropped his shoulders and closed his eyes. Was he disappointed in me? He was looking down so I couldn't tell his expression, but he was surely thinking that.

".... Is that alright with you? Are you really alright with an ending like that?"

"Yes. I don't care how it ends. I give up everything. I'm tired of it all."

".... Alright."

I could hear the reply. Did he realize it? The truth that everything was over already. There was no more need to resist. Everything will be fine

after a few moments of pain.

Suimei was already standing with his back turned to her.

But that wasn't the way she wanted him to be. That black robed figure was standing to meet the threat of Rajas head on.

"Suimei?"

"Then I'll do what I want. If Lefille thinks that, then all I need to do is make that evil creature surrender."

Suimei's words showed his belief in hope. His belief was so short sighted, my own voice became harsh.

"What are you talking about! You don't even know Rajas' full power! Rajas is fundamentally different from the mazokus you defeated so far!"

"He probably is. But if I give up here, I can't save you, Lefille and I can't reach what I chased after either."

Was what he declared triumphantly to Rajas just before what he was chasing after?

"To save who cannot be saved? You idiot! People who will be miserable will exist in the world! Anywhere and anytime. There's no exception!"

"Even then."

"It's all a fantasy! A fraud! A story that would come out in a child's dream."

"Even then."

"What about 'even then'? If you say some empty words like that, does it suddenly save us?"

“Even then.”

“..... That kind of thing, it’ll never be achieved. It’s impossible. Never...”

That was right. It will never happen. Somewhere in this world was a person going hungry. Somewhere in this world was a person collapsing from sadness. Somewhere in this world was a person dying with rage in their heart. And someone who could not be saved existed here.

There were no exceptions. Someone who could not be saved existed. Always.

He probably knew that, deep down inside. If he was someone with rational sense, if he faced the truth, it was a fantasy that he should have abandoned a long time ago.

But still, as if he was trying to explain something to a child who couldn’t understand, he swayed his head and—

“Lefille, that’s not something you decide. Whether I could save someone or not will be found out at the end of the path I walk.”

“What are you going to do chasing something like that? It’s abstract and uncertain. Do you think it will just end at not finding it if you keep walking down that path? At the end of that path is the despair of someone who was betrayed by hope.”

“Perhaps.”

“Then—”

“But I’m not going to look back. Isn’t that right? My dream does not exist behind me. The day I give up my dreams, that man who swore an oath back then doesn’t exist anymore. So—”

— So, just watch me. The hope that I dream of. Watch me chase after my hope.

“Ah.....”

Why was that figure, who defeated my argument with simple ‘watch me’, so bright? It was the brightness of the soul that none had witnessed before.

Rajas who was thrown back returned, crushing the earth with each step. Glaring murderously, focused on Suimei.

“Boy, you dare.....”

“Stay down when you get thrown back, you fiendish bastard!”

“Shutuppppppp!!”

With that roar, a ball of energy in Rajas’ hand grew exponentially. Black swallowed black and casted jaded purplish-shadows all around the area. It was Rajas’ magic that had obliterated a Noshias’ fortress and turned this land barren.

“It’s time for you and that wench to disappear forever!”

This was the end. The end. I didn’t have any more spirit powers left, so there is no way to withstand that attack. There was no magic strong enough to resist that kind of power in this land. That was why...

“Suimei.... That’s enough.... Let’s give up....”

Even though nothing would change, Suimei ignored my words and chanted magic as if that kind of attack was nothing.

“Non amo munus scutum omnes impetum invictus.” (My shield is not a shield. It is strong before any attack and unshakeable under any fire.)

The mana grew larger with the casting chant. Golden mana spread as if resisting the darkness and started rotating like a tornado.

“Invincibility immobilitas immortalis cumque mane surrexistant castle.”
(Indestructible slab of rock, the castle decorated with golden light formed from the essence of the stars. Its name is...)

Each ray of the golden light split and headed to their respective destination as if trying to carry their own mission. They started to form into the shape of a glowing gold lightning. Clacking sound, as if they were fitting into each other, sounded and—

“Firmus congrega aurum magnalea!” (My sturdy and radiant castle)

At the end of Suimei’s chant, the magic circles came together to overlap each other. At the same time the magic circle formed, darkness swallowed the scenery as if it would take everything away.

“—Kuuggh!!”

.... This was the end. End of everything. The onslaught of Rajas’ attack would suck in both body and soul into darkness.

But— It wasn’t the end. I had closed my two eyes in anticipation of death. When I opened my eyes, Suimei and I were unharmed and still living.

After the cloud of sand settled down, I was not the only one standing in surprise.

“H, how could this be....?! My power was strong enough to blow away an entire fortress. Why? Why isn’t it working now?”

While a shocked voice rang out, there was a breathtaking sight happening nearby.

There were letters and numbers arranged geometrically projecting a barrier around the area. Golden mana light surrounded them. In the magic circle drawn on the ground, there were clock hands for hour and minute drawn on it. Other magic circles were spread out as if protecting the nearby vicinity. Big and small magic circles, and there were magic circles I had seen before as well. We were surrounded by numerous golden magic circles.

That was right. It was like a fortress of magic circles.

“Hmph— Don’t compare my golden fortress to something insignificant. This is a copy of a military base from the other world. If you wanted to penetrate it, your attack should have been several times stronger than the ‘Roar of the Red Dragon’ .”

“ ‘Other world’...? You mean you’re....”

“Hmph, that’s not of your concern!”

When Suimei extended his right arm, a silver-ish sword formed, and along with Rajas’ surprised voice, blew away dusts and debris alike.

“You bastarrrrddddd!!”

Rajas finally seemed to have recognized him as a strong opponent and attacked with all his strength. The one who waited for Rajas to attack was Suimei. He eliminated the defensive fortress with mana and charged with the edge of the blade standing.

Rajas’s way of fighting was simple, but he was nimble and strong.

.... Rajas was gigantic. For a mere human, even a scratch from that fist would turn a man into pulp. But Suimei took this fight to the close-quarters.

That feeling of approaching death was palpable. Still, Suimei's spirit did not diminish.

He dodged Rajas' indiscriminating attacks and fought with the mana imbued silver sword while chaining words together to cast magic.

It was a difficult battle and even a single strike from Rajas' fist was deadly. But he didn't appear pitiable. As if he was saying that red hot resolve in his heart was the source of his energy, his back was sturdy like they were embedded with metal implants. His appearance of never bending and standing straight was stronger than anyone here.

Every time the mazoku's qi brushed by his skin and clothes, small gashes increased on Suimei's face and body. But he didn't stop. The boy's courageous roars dispelled oncoming tide of fear. All atmosphere that discouraged my heart, he repelled and penetrated through them.

... While he was fighting a heated battle with his wounded body, while he was soaked in the heat of battle, I came to my sense.

— Just what am I doing.

While he was fighting, I abandoned everything, denied all his words and just knelt there. I was simply watching. I decided that there was nothing I could do and just watched. I didn't know for how long, but I watched.

"....."

What was visible was his back. That single minded back. That determined heart of a boy who wants everyone who cries at this unjust world to be happy. That shining back.

Save those who cannot be saved. His determination to say such a thing. Is it fine to be fascinated by him yet do nothing—?

Suimei's body bounced off Rajas' fist and flew back in front of me. He was hurt all over. But his strength to get back up, nor his determination did not diminish one bit. He stood up strong as if he was saying he didn't lose yet.

I didn't realize when but I was talking to him when I realized.

"Suimei.... Why do you go so far...."

What drives you to go so far? When I asked that, he spoke curtly while still facing forward.

"Because I want to protect you."

"—"

When I listened his words, something revived within me. The heated heart lying at the center of the broken heart.

"You know how it feels, right? You have someone you want to protect as well. You came here because you had someone you wanted to protect even if it cost your life, right?"

"Ah—"

I wanted to protect. That was right. His thoughts and beliefs were the same as mine. That was why he was standing tall here no matter how much he was hurt.

Was it alright for me to give up like this? No, it wasn't alright. I didn't want that kind of an end. I never wanted that kind of an end. I wanted to run towards my dream once more. Never stopping, just like that boy with the same thought as me.

.... That boy charged towards the gigantic enemy once more. To push

forward his belief.

When I realized it, I couldn't sit by any longer.

"I—"

So once more. One more time. Give me the strength to fight once more. I prayed dearly with my bloodied, pain-filled and unsightly figure.

"Our goddess, Alshuna. For me, who couldn't change anything on my own. For me, who couldn't change on my own. Please give me the courage to change myself just once. I implore you, just once. Just one more chance for me—"

It was a sincere wish and dearly prayed words. To encourage myself and blessing of revival to be able to grab the sword once more. But the goddess would never help. I already knew it. Because she didn't exist in this world. She simply watched on. So all these words were to help myself change.

Then when I opened my eyes, my body was filled with strength that was not there before. As if the time I knelt and gave up was a lie, the weakness that occupied my heart did not exist anywhere now.

The one who gave me this strength, this courage, was that boy standing in front. He taught me to push forward with my belief. He showed me physically, he awoke me, so I could stand again.

I grabbed the sword I had dropped and swung with all my might.

The red wind created by the sword cut between Suimei and Rajas.

"Haaat— that wench?! Where did you get that strength?"

"Lefille....."

What greeted me, who stood up once again, was a face of shock and a face of happiness. There was no need to explain to whom each of the face belonged to.

The power of spirit. I released all the power I could muster. Red Wind. Everything dyed crimson as if the spirit of war and fire Ishaktoni's crimson flash. Rajas couldn't withstand the sudden gust of wind and stepped back.

"K..kuuh..... This is."

Rajas blocked his face with his arms to avoid the gale. I spoke out my resolve while pointing the sword at him.

"..... Rajas. Watch closely with your own two eyes. This is the power that will exterminate you mazokus. The disciple of the goddess. Power of the spirit."

"Power to destroy what? You're just a wench who ran because you were afraid of death!"

"—Shut up..... I won't run anymore to live like who I am right now! No matter what or who. Even from this fate!"

"You stupid girl! Only thing you can do is blabberrrrr!"

I faced screaming Rajas' fist with the greatsword and crimson flash. A fist and an arm with strong aura extended this way, but I didn't fly back this time. I wrapped the sword with the red wind and struck at Rajas' fist, deflecting it.

"Kuuu! W, what?! That was completely different from before....."

The difference was natural. My weak self died moments ago, and what

stood here was my new self. Attacks that pressed me until now didn't work anymore. And I didn't have the time to explain something like that to him.

"Hyyaaaapp!!"

I put even greater strength into my hands that were swinging the sword as if saying my ears no longer wanted to hear his baffled voice.

This round was different than just before. I didn't fall behind in speed and my number of attacks were greater. The power of the attack was also enough to pierce him.

Perhaps he was shocked, but Rajas flailed his arms around randomly. It was random and inaccurate attacks, but luckily, Rajas spotted a chance for a critical strike. If it landed, it wouldn't end at a mere injury. Of course, that was based on the assumption it would find its mark.

— So I became like the colour of light which surrounded me, a crimson flash.

No one could watch my movement to the end. The crimson wind surpassed all speed and left no shadow. The swiftness was wonderous. With speed fast enough to mistake for a teleportation, I moved behind Rajas' back as if I was sliding.

"You wench, when did you—"

By the time he noticed and turned around, it was too late. At the same time I finished materializing, a precise strike slashed Rajas' chest.

"Kuup. Kuaaaaahhh!"

Rajas' boulder like chest split open. It was not a fatal blow, but from the

wound, the source of mazoku's power, which had tormented her until now, steamed out.

This was the perfect opportunity.

"Gala varna!" (Basan)

I swung the greatsword above my head and struck like a flash with all my strength. With my posture so low I was almost touching the ground, a crimson flash erupted, taking the form of a gigantic strike and cut through the sky and earth.



Then the attack hit Rajas, who was surrounded with steam like source of power—but

“You’re tough.”

Rajas was still alive and well despite having received Basan’s attack head on. There were cuts everywhere on his body with steam sprouting everywhere, but he was standing. He was struck with Suimei and my attack consecutively. Just how strong was this mazoku?

“Kuhhp....!!”

While my face was frowning with anxiousness and tiredness from consecutive attacks, Rajas suddenly took a huge step back.

I was tense wondering what his plan was, but his gigantic body turned around.

Was he planning to cut and run?

“What— stop right there!”

“... We’ll push back this duel to next time. Swordsman of Noshias.”

He probably decided that it was disadvantageous for him to continue.

Rajas, who spoke as if he was outraged, attempted to escape. It seemed he had some strength left as he flew and moved far away in a blink of an eye.

“Hyaaaaaaaaa!!”

I launched a torrent of attack towards Rajas as if I would cut his backside whole. But the speed of the red wind couldn’t match Rajas’. Crimson flash that couldn’t close the distance became weaker and turned into a normal breeze.

— He got away. There was no way to land an attack with that kind of distance. The story would be different if I could fly like Rajas, but I couldn't.

That was why it ended here. I could finally get here thanks to Suimei. He helped me, but the enemy I needed to defeat managed to get away from the place where I was suppose to defeat him.

"Damn it...."

The duel was postponed to later. To end things in such a clammy manner.. I just needed to take one more step... Just a little bit... If I surpassed him just a little bit more... Then I might have...

— It was when I bit my lips in dejection.

Intensity of mana rose behind my back. No, a lukewarm expression like "rose" wasn't suitable to describe it. This was the shockwave occurring when mana explosively increased. And the one who was creating it was of course —

"S, Suimei?"

Did this boy have no end to his mana? Did he still have strength left over after defeating the mazoku army, defend against Rajas' attack and even fight him? He walked over here while maintaining his power. It was like he was taking a leisurely stroll and soon he stood beside me. And what rang out was the magician's voice.

"Abreq ad habra." (Death, you will be destroyed before my thunder)

.... Gigantic crimson sword-like wind turned to mere winds just behind him.

It was dangerous. To think that wench stood up again in no time. No, not only that, but to get even stronger. I don't know what happened, but it was probably because of that mage brat.

He grinded his teeth after tasting the bitterness of retreating.

"I won't forget this humiliation, humans. I'll pay you back once this wound heals...."

Rajas flew towards even greater elevation while captivated by rage and muttering endlessly.

"...It might be dangerous to pass through a cumulonimbus cloud with this kind of injury, but it can't be helped."

What I looked at was the escape route I needed to go through. There was a possibility they could catch up if I flew too low. Considering how far away they were now, it wasn't likely to happen, but this was after that dramatic reversal in battle. I knew I could hide for certain if I went past the clouds.

It was infuriating, but I had taken severe damage due to that wench's counter-attack. If I just jumped into the cumulonimbus cloud in my current state, it wouldn't be pretty. But now wasn't the time to be concerned with something like that. This was the only way to go back.

— That's right. It was the time to worry about penetrating through the cumulonimbus cloud.

"What....?"

I noticed it when I looked up.

My mind went blank at the unexpected turn of events. That was right—

There was no cumulonimbus cloud. Nowhere in the sky.

“—?!”

I was so surprised I looked around left and right furiously. Something that should have been there wasn't there. That cumulonimbus cloud carrying thunder with it, that loud thunder, it was just there until moments ago.

I stared at the spot wondering if I was seeing things, but there was no cumulonimbus cloud. There was only the cloudy sky hiding the starlight.

There was thunder sounding from somewhere since some time ago. It was incredibly noisy even during the battle. But how could it have been? Where was the thunder noise coming from even though there was no cumulonimbus cloud?

I looked down in that moment.

“What.....?!”

I couldn't say anything at the abominable plight occurring just under my feet.

At the end of the gaze was an incredible sight that stopped my breath. The army that was assembled in the plains, mountainside and the forest was nowhere to be seen. In their place were burning flames, and sunken earth.

Ones trapped in never-melting ice, ones boiling and melting in the sea of eternally decaying ocean of poison and acid. And on the ground was a figure with a familiar-like shadow. The most shocking thing above all was the fact the remains did not match the number of his minions.

The army I had brought wasn't there as if they never existed in the first place.

"W, what happened here...."

There was no way something like this could have happened. Even if the humans sent an army, they could never create such a horrendous sight. I knew that extremely well from battles at Noshias. But if an atrocity like this happened here, there must be a culprit as well—

If there was a culprit, it was probably him.

— I simply removed the ones blocking my path.

That boy's words came clearly to the mind as if he had whispered it into my ears. Those words and the atrocity below connected.

That was right. Before that boy reached me, my minions would've have blocked him.

And the one who stood in the centre of it all was that boy. That human who proclaimed himself a magician.

.... The thunder smashed the ground and the wind howled. It destroyed everything at random. The power generated by the boy at the centre threw back sands and stones, and turned it all into soot.

A shockwave. It was a shockwave. Because the power that formed the magic was too strong, the shockwave was annihilating everything around him. The way thunders pulverized everything around it, the way eye of the tornado was localizing, they were only miniaturized version of what would happen in the near future.

"T, that's the precursor....? It doesn't make any sense—"

— That was right. There was no way for the Demon Chief Rajas to know. Abra Merin, Abrahamic magic type. Commonly known as “Divine Magic” or “Holy Magic”. This magic was the most famous and powerful of the magics that borrowed power from holy guardian angels to repel, dispel and control demons — Abrakadabra (Pour the thunder unto your death).

He took the spell as a framework and turned it into his greatest offensive magic spell against demons and ghosts using modern magic theories.

Behind the back of the man who appeared like a haze was a figure of a woman. There was no feeling of life from the figure shaped like a woman. It was as if the sculpture was made from colour of minerals existing between grey and grey. It was neither holy nor evil. But there was immense power emanating from it.

“Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhh.....”

That sculpture opened its mouth wide and shouted to summon a pillar of lighting from the sky.

.... I had never seen something like that before. A mere human commanding this unknown power, a mysterious power. That kind of power was not something a human of this world could possess. Even if he was a hero called from another world, it was impossible. A hero received the goddess’ power when summoned. A hero could never possess an ability like that.

That was right. A hero was a being summoned with absolute blessings of the elements and strength far surpassing a normal human. But that man did not possess any of the traits. So it was not possible.

That was a magic without the elements’ blessing. It controlled uncontrollable ideas, changed the reality and changed this world created by the Goddess as it pleased. That thunder in front of my eyes was holier and more frightening than anything ever encountered before.

I've never heard of anyone possessing that kind of strength, that kind of abilities. No human in this world wielded that kind of unreasonable power. None whatsoever.

But where did that man.... How...

— Magician, Akagi Suimei.

"A magician....? What's that?! That boy isn't a mage?!"

The thunder split into thousands of strands, leaving torrent of echos after a loud noise and gathered at the centre of the pile of magic circles.

The sculpture shouted endlessly and blue flashing light filled up the world from the sky to the end of horizon. At the end of my sight was the face of a similarly shocked and resolved crimson eyes from that cheeky boy. And the unmistakable aura of death that cannot be dodged—

"DamnitTTTTT!!"

— Now, you evil creature that sucks on humanity's despair like honey. Rot away and disappear before the association magicians' holy path.

I could see the man's lips moving clearly.

After that, he placed a finger at the centre of the magic circle.

In a moment, deafening thunderous noise passed by. Thousands of strands of light inside the radius of the magic circle formed a gigantic pillar and consumed everything in sight.

The darkness of the god of death I worshipped did not exist anywhere. Nowhere.

And thus, the Demon Chief Rajas screamed in rage before being sucked into a strand of light created by the holy thunder.

Epilogue



"I'm exhausted."

Suimei laid down with his limbs spread out while chasing the blinking thunder disappear into the darkness with his eyes. He felt the sensation of hardness of the ground with his back as he catch his breath.

He really poured everything he had this time. He had to figure out how strong the mazokus were as well as whittle down their strength, but it

might have been too adventurous to have killed any mazoku standing in the way. Especially the battle with Rajas and "abraq ad hav" at the end.

Rajas possessed surprising amount of strength, so his magic wasn't as effective as he had hoped. In the end, he was almost forced to field the strongest trump card amongst the divine magic he could use.

But he no longer had mana left. This meant there was no possibility.

Suimei thought that as he looked at the sky where Rajas had disappeared off to.

".... Was it just luck?"

Frankly, it was unexpected that holy magic was the most effective magic against the mazokus. From the conversation with Lefille, he wondered if they were related with an evil called "god of death", but to think it was correct. It might have been obvious that darkness was weak to light or evil being was subservient to divine being, but for a magician like him, it was a blind spot.

He avoided the simple assumption that mazokus were evil beings and focused on the fact they were special magical beings of this world. That was why he began to realize it when he first came in contact with their

uncomfortable aura and came to the conclusion in the forest. It was several hours after the first battle.

The mindset of a magician, whether it was logical or biological trap. It was because he tried to find a conventional weakness, he did not realize such a simple truth. It was strange in some sense.

But he was lucky that it was holy magic that was effective. If a magic that was effective against mazoku was one of the magics that was diluted in strength due to this world, it could have been a disadvantageous situation against Rajas.

Originating from Judea's secret ritual, Kabbalah and to Gnosticism, Abramelin Abraham's magic was used as anti-demonic and anti-undead magic in modern times. This divine secret was a re-arrangement of his magic, and due to the special attributes of the magic, it was only effective against certain types of evil.

If one wanted to utilize over a certain amount of power, it took time to summon a "Divine Guardian Angel" and entrust half the soul momentarily. But unlike magic that were less effective unless used on earth, such as astrology or needing earth's object or geography, divine magic had no limitation to due to location.

The void that exists between outer realm and between each realm. The unadulterated and unsorted power that exists in the void— Etheric. And by materializing a divine guardian angel, which was a unique spirit that

did not fall under any category of spirits from monad, there was no problem using the magic in this world as it was a technique utilizing a structured magic.

It was lucky that the magic he used with all his might was effective. Guess one could call it a luck that the absolute power of the magic he used was around Rajas' strength.

But the power of the god of death was bestowed on the mazokus. If there was a mazoku that possessed greater strength and more power than Rajas, it wouldn't end so easily.

"..... Nakshatra. Well, I don't have any plans to get involved."

The leader of them all, Demon King Nakshatra. That sorry mess of nuisance covered in veil, without even knowing if it was him or her, probably received even greater power from the god of death than Rajas. He didn't plan to get involved with it, but there was a chance for encounter and there was a possibility that another Demon Chief would be stronger than Rajas.

There was a need to plan ahead just in case. Thinking ahead made his head throb in pain.

Lefille, who was beside Suimei who still breathed roughly and let out a sigh, spoke.

"Suimei. Thanks. I lived because you came."

"It's nothing. It's kind of embarrassing to hear that after showing up late."

Suimei admitted his true thought after hearing Lefille thank him. He could not deny that he was reluctant ever since he first faced against a mazoku. If he had resolved himself, he wouldn't have been late either. And the rest was history.

".... Are the others?"

".... Yeah."

Her depressed voice was the reply. It could have been easily guessed from the atrocious scenery on the way here, but to think they were all dead.

He had already given up anticipation of them being fine from the moment he grabbed her not to go and an adventurer controlled by a mazoku appeared. It was not something he should be saying but they were comrades he spent time with. Their death was regrettable.

Looking back, when he chased Lefille into the forest was the split in the road. If he was able to convince others more proficiently back then, if he

could make Lefille stay, it could have ended better.

Of course, he thought everything was too late to contemplate now.....

".....Suimei. Don't think too much about it. It's not something I should be saying, but it's not your fault that they're dead."

"Thanks for saying that. But aren't you thinking about it more than me, Lefille?"

"T, that's"

She spoke as if she was caught off guard when questioned back. Soon, desolate atmosphere surrounded them. She was definitely thinking about it. There was no way she couldn't. She couldn't protect the ones she wanted to protect. Whether it was because she was late or whether she couldn't save them even though she was not late, it was painful nonetheless.

And Rajas aimed precisely for that. A creature as evil as that was proficient in digging into the opponent's' weakness as well. Almost disgustingly proficient.

That was why it hurt her even more.

".... Lefille. Unlike me, you didn't hesitate to jump in and save others. Don't be so hard on yourself."

"O, ok...."

Her stuttering voice was heavy. Words like "you tried", or "you did what you could" was nothing but a cheap consolation before everything that had transpired. That was why Lefille was depressed and there was nothing more he could say.

How long was she like that? Was she praying for those who passed away? Or was it the time she took to get herself back together again? Amidst deep silence, Lefille spoke out of nowhere.

"Suimei, I....."

"Hmm?"

"I, I want to thank you."

"..... What. Again?"

She already thanked him earlier. Suimei thought weirdly about her

repeating words, but there was a calm but embarrassed voice that followed up.

“Just before. When you said you came to save me, I was very happy. So.....”

“Ah, okay.....”

“Thanks.”

“Y, yea.... It was nothing that my lady needs to thank me for.”

Due to Lefille’s serious tone, a rare respectful way of speech popped out from Suimei. It was pretty embarrassing to hear her say it again — but thinking back, what he said when facing Rajas and talking to her was all very embarrassing stuff.

Uwaaaaahhhh—

What I chased after. The association’s philosophy and father’s wish. My way of saving people. The self-righteousness. It was the atmosphere. It was the atmosphere’s fault. It was the atmosphere’s fault that he blurted it all out. That was right.

He simply needed to think of them like that and forget it ever happened.

Suimei thought like that shook his head vigorously. When Suimei began to avoid facing the reality, Lefille spoke with resolve-filled voice.

"Thanks to you, I could find courage. I'm not going to give up and walk on my own path properly. Well, getting stronger and fighting mazokus won't change."

..... She seemed to have recovered her broken heart. It was fortunate that she managed to suppress her despair.

When Suimei looked up into the sky without saying anything, Lefille spoke in curious tone.

"..... What is it?"

"Hmm? Ah, I think that's good as well."

"I won't give up anymore. I'm going to try my best to the end no matter what. You taught me that."

To the girl speaking such embarrassing words with a straight face, Suimei spoke with self-deprecating tone.

"Stop it. I copied those words from someone else."

“Copied?”

“Yea, I was scolded by someone extremely strong before. I heard it then.”

That was right. I knew what it was like to be denied. Having to hear it from someone strong felt as if the entire world was denying me. When stuck in that difficult situation, when I hesitated in my heart, there was a man who pointed out that my dream didn't exist behind me. That was right—

“You met a good person.”

“No, I thought he was out of his mind at the time. Well, I thank him nonetheless, but he's fundamentally evil.”

Lefille thought of those words as a story. A surprised “eh....” sound could be heard.

That was right. That man who said those words only ever laughed at others dreams. He was the kind of a man who appeared out of nowhere in crucial moments to applaud and interrupt. He probably thought it wouldn't be fun to have the person he was watching die.

That was why, that was why back then, he said something like that.....

“..... But his words back then, he probably meant it.”

“You seem confused yourself.”

“Is that so.”

“Fufufu.....”

What was so funny? Lefille suddenly smiled a little. The conversation partner smiled so warmly at the end of the story, it felt as if being treated like a child and a little unpleasant — but it was fortunate to just be able to listen to her warm voice.

Either way, the battle was over. The worst case was avoided — it was that moment of being relieved and lying in a comfortable atmosphere. Something occurred beside Suimei, who was lying down.

—— Thump.

“Hiyuuu!!”

Suddenly a sound of something being thrown on the ground and a cute

scream could be heard. It was probably, no, definitely Lefille's voice, but this kind of high pitched voice was never heard before.

Of course, this was the first time Suimei heard Lefille scream.

"Oi, Lefille, what's happening....."

Even moving was painful, so he barely turned his head to look. Over there was the owner of the voice, Lefille, as expected.

——— A really small Lefille.

"Ouch.... What is it, Suimei?"

He witnessed such a flabbergasting moment, he wanted to rub his eyes. Just like that, there was a young girl who appeared as if she was in the elementary school.

Red haired ponytail. Slightly raised and sharp shape of the eyes, and white skin befitting a person from a snowy country. The calm black atmosphere sensed when he first saw her. She definitely looked like Lefille. So this small girl was miniaturized Lefille..... Definitely.

But what was this situation? Because her body became smaller, the clothes became baggy, and tears hung at the edge of eyes as she planted her face on the ground when she fell, she was wiping away the mud on

her face with the back of her hands. She asked that question, but it was him who wanted to ask her that——

“No, what happened with you? You became smaller.”

“Smaller....?”

When asked, the smaller Lefille tilted her head with what could only be described as a lovely expression and looked at her body. And the expression changed to that of panic.

“Eh? Eh? W, what is this? What’s going on Suimei?”

“No, no, no. I’m the one who should be asking you that.”

“My body! My body’s smaller! Why? Why did this happen?”

“Is this the first time it’s happened? Ah, I guess it is a first time....”

“Of course! There’s no way something like this happened before!”

Lefille, who was shouting at the strange incident that occurred suddenly, was confused. It was the first time. Well, it would be difficult to have such event occur regularly as well. But Lefille spoke as if she had her suspicions.

“D, did Rajas use some evil spell on me during the fight...”

Lefille spoke with a serious expression. Her anxiousness could be felt. If it was a curse, considering what happened before, it could be considered, but would he really have used a curse that turned back age? Plus, it took effect after everything was over. Even for a curse, it showed up way too late. This kind of curse was useless no matter the situation.

He looked carefully to see if it was something Rajas did with his last bit of strength.

“..... No, it doesn’t look like it. There’s no trace of any curse other than the one you already had.”

“Uhh, then why——”

Lefille, who was holding her head with her arms showed anxious expression like never before.

But now was the time to think about why this happened first. She appeared to look for clues to the cause, was there really something that would cause this kind of abnormality?

There were many factors that separated Lefille from a regular human.

— Power of the spirits.

Speaking of which, Suimei remembered extraordinary power Lefille emitted towards end of the battle. The way Lefille commanded over the air around her was an ability different from what he had seen so far. The strength of the power, the area of effect of the power, and the kind of the power. It was different from when it blew away mazoku minions. It was strong enough to be described of a different calibre.

With those guesses in mind, the answer was obvious.

But that's way too simple.

Suimei silently denied the conclusion he came to in his heart. But he recalled the divine magic case that just happened. Considering he arrived at the answer because he did not think things simplistically, that kind of straightforward thinking could not be denied in this world.

"Say, Lefille."

"..... Smaller. Everything. All of it. Uuuuh. What is it, it feels like I've lost everything precious at once.... Heee."

"Oi. OI!"

"Hmm? Ah, sorry. What is it, Suimei?"

Lefille looked at Suimei while hiding her sigh with her sleeve. Suimei spoke his theory to her.

"Maybe your body became smaller because you used too much spirit power, Lefille."

".....? Why do you think that?"

"Hmm— It's just a guess, but your body is a mix between half human and half spirit. If you use too much of the spirit's original body of power like etheric or monad, the spirit part would disappear...."

"There's words I don't recognize mixed in there.... So simply put, you mean I'm like this because I used too much power? But how is that related to my body becoming smaller? Until now, I was never like this no matter how much power I used. Plus, does it make sense in the first place to have my body shrink? You simply can't use the power of the spirit if it disappears."

"Well, that's true. But you're a spirit, Lefille. There's a lot of unexplained things where I come from, too....."

That was right. In that other world, it has been a long time since spirits existed and since there were not many records as well, the beings called “spirits” were not fully explained.

But Lefille, who was born a half-spirit possessed a physical body as well as an astral body and energy composed of spirits to maintain her body. It could be thought as having used too much of what composed part of the body and it being simply depleted, but just as she said, body becoming smaller was questionable. No—

“.... Yeah. Lefille, your body originated from a spirit so it’s fundamentally different from a physical body. Your existence is like a summoned spirit. The manifesting existence has its real form and physical body resting in this world. If the spirit power, which forms the basis, gets weaker, the real body becomes faint. Ah, if that’s the case, it’s comprehensible. The being called Lefille is there, but the existence become more faint. So it manifests itself smaller and thus it affects the real body.”

“S, Suimei! I can’t understand anything because you’re making it too complicated! Summarize simply!”

“Hmm? Ah, sorry. I’ll summarize it later... That’s that, but Lefille, don’t go too wild in that state....”

Before Suimei could finish, Lefille tripped over her own clothes and shoes——

“W, wah!? Hiik?!”

She fell on her face again. She waddled in the place to get up momentarily before deciding it was too difficult to do on her own and asked Suimei reluctantly.

“..... Suimei, I’m sorry, but can you lend me a hand? The clothes and the shoes are too big for me to get up by myself.”

“.....”

“Suimei?”

Lefille called over with a curious voice as to why Suimei wasn’t answering— But Suimei didn’t have the strength to help her. He had his own troubles, laying flat on the ground.

“Uhhh.... You see.... I used too much strength, so I can’t move.”

“.....”

“.....”

The silence that oppressed the place. The awkward silence. Looking at the situation, nobody could move.

Dark future could be glimpsed and Suimei tried to smooth over the situation with a dry laughter.

“Hahaha..... What should we do?”

“Ha.... What indeed....”

..... Finally after some time, Suimei recovered to the point he could stand up and after pulling up Lefille who was tangled by her clothes, went down the mountain together.

— At the same time. In the castle even farther north than the land people called “far north”, there was someone who was kneeling towards the throne.

He had the appearance of a human, but upon closer inspection, possessed several features different from a human and was definitely not a being one could call a human.

That being — one of the Demonic Chief, Lishabam, stood up and paid

respects to the one sitting on the throne. And knelt again.

The one who was sitting on the throne — a girl wearing flashy clothes decorated with black, watched the man pay his respects and spoke with soft voice while supporting her chin with an arm lying on the armrest.

".... What is it. I was just about to pleasantly doze off, but why are you here?"

When the girl asked, a man's somewhat high pitched voice returned.

"I have something urgent to report to your majesty."

"..... What is it."

Then the kneeling Lishabam paused for a moment before replying to the girl's question.

"Chief Rajas' presence disconnected just moments ago."

"Ho?"

Disconnected. As if that word was interesting, the girl erased her soft expression and leaned out from the throne.

"I ordered him to kill the hero that was first summoned, correct?"

"Yes, your grace."

"Then it means the hero..... defeated him."

"I believe the possibility is there."

When Lishabam did not agree fully but used a politician-like expression, the girl slightly opened her eyes.

".... Your way of speaking is still the same."

"I agree with that."

".... Well, no matter. Hmm, is that the case... Rajas...."

When the girl muttered those words as if she was chewing on the information, Lishabam raised his face and asked a question.

"What do you plan to do, your majesty?"

"Yes.... I want to go myself, but that's not possible. Since the vanguard was destroyed, I'll have to tweak the plan."

"What plan do you have in mind?"

"First, send Vishuda and Mura to the western area bordering us. Prepare them to attack the humans."

"Will they move immediately?"

"It's a deployment I have taken that into calculation as well. The more time I give them, more will be baited."

When the girl smiled, Lishabam smiled like a response.

"As you command."

After a short reply, Lishabam disappeared into the darkness. And only the girl was left in the room once again.

— A subordinate lost. But there was no sign of sadness on the girl's expression. She simply laughed out loud like a child who discovered something interesting.

“Kuhuhu, a hero summoned from another world. To think Rajas would lose. I look forward to seeing him one day.”

That was right. That girl — Demon King Nakshatra’s laughter echoed throughout the Demon King’s Castle.